EL BORAK AND OTHER DESERT ADVENTURES

ROBERT E. HOWARD

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El Borak and Other Desert Adventures

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Robert E. Howard

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and Jim & Ruth Keegan

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Swords of the Hills
first published in *The Lost Valley of Iskander*, 1974
(as *The Lost Valley of Iskander*)

The Daughter of Erlik Khan
first published in *Top-Notch Magazine*, December 1934

Three-Bladed Doom (long version)
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Hawk of the Hills
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Sons of the Hawk
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(as *The Country of the Knife*)

Son of the White Wolf
first published in *Thrilling Adventures*, December 1936

Gold from Tatary
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Swords of Shahrazar
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The Fire of Asshurbanipal
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Three-Bladed Doom (short version)
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Untitled
appears here for the first time

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My work here is dedicated to Frank Frazetta, Gary Gianni, Mark Schultz,
Michael Wm. Kaluta, Bernie Wrightson, and Steranko.
And to Robert E. Howard, wherever you are.

—Tim Bradstreet

For Mark Westermoe

—Jim & Ruth Keegan

In loving memory of our friend and colleague
Steve Tompkins
1960–2009

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“The fighters revolved about each other.

“Not until it was looming over him, the great arms closing upon him”

“There were human skulls nailed above the gate.”

“…Afzal Khan came and stood over them, combing his crimson beard.”

“They passed into a mighty hall of misty twilight.”

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Artists' Forewords

I once saw an amazing illustration of El Borak by one of my art gods, Jim Steranko. It was a classic Steranko piece, charged with his incredible display of black vs. white. Francis Xavier Gordon was holding a long rifle in the shot if I recollect correctly. Well, it inspired me a great deal. I was immediately curious. Who in the hell is El Borak? Several years later I was fortunate enough to run across an old used copy of *Son of the White Wolf and* got my first real taste of the bold adventurer. I was smitten. I was already a huge fan of Howard's Conan stories, and here I felt as if I was reading Conan but dropped into a world right out of David Lean's masterpiece, *Lawrence of Arabia:* romantic, brutal, and dripping with the blood of El Borak's fallen foes. I feel much the same love for Howard's other characters in the same vein: Kirby O'Donnell, aka Ali el Ghazi, an American of Black Irish descent, and Steve Clarney — all Americans, and all adventuring in the same real estate around the same time. Would have been cool if they'd all met for an adventure. One of my great inspirations and idols, Frank Frazetta, once said, "I wanted to paint the raw, brutal, primitive world of Howard like it's never been done before." That's pretty much how I felt walking into this opportunity. Howard's words simultaneously electrify and inspire me as I read his work. Frazetta's words also resonate with me despite the fact he was referring to Conan. It's all one when it comes to Howard. My approach to this work was to slash the world in half with black or white, to blow out the edges with harsh desert light, and fill in the details with deepest black shadow. This is how I see the desert adventures.

— *Tim Bradstreet*

Illustrating this work makes us think of those old suitcases papered in colorful travel stickers from all over the world.

Though he was born at a later time than such writers of adventure fiction as Kipling, Haggard, and even Burroughs, Robert E. Howard managed to capture that same classic spirit in these stories. At a time when places for adventuring were dwindling, the Middle East of the 1930s had not changed unrecognizably far from the wondrous visions put to canvas by a parade of brilliant Orientalist painters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It's easy to imagine Howard's trio of Texans moving about in a David Roberts landscape of ancient ruins and monumental edifices — a mixture of T. E. Lawrence, Allan Quatermain, and "Chinese" Gordon — with a little bit of Douglas Fairbanks, crossing swords in *The Thief of Baghdad*, thrown in for good measure.

Your passport is stamped, the boilers are stoked, and faraway places await.

— Jim & Ruth Keegan

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Introduction

Playing the Great Game, a man may feel as though he lives the only life worth while because he has been stripped of everything which may still be considered to be accessory. Life itself seems to be left in a fantastically intensified purity, when man has cut himself off from all ordinary social ties, family, regular occupation, a definite goal, ambitions, and the guarded place in a community to which he belongs by birth.

— Hannah Arendt

Life itself, the adventurer's life lived just shy of death's skeletal clasp, glows with Ms. Arendt's "fantastically intensified purity" for the Robert E. Howard characters Francis Xavier Gordon and Kirby O'Donnell, years after they've jettisoned the domesticating attachments and antecedents she lists. Both Irish-Americans deal themselves into the Great Game, the contest for control of Central Asia that Rudyard Kipling insisted would only end "when everyone is dead," but Gordon, El Borak, is the more fleshed-out and filled-in protagonist, a gunfighter-turned-blademaster who has exchanged the American Southwest for the Northwest Frontier of the British Raj.

He was a part of Howard's creativity both early and late, and in between benefited from an evolution, a *maturation*, which did not play itself out in public, or in publications, but underwrote the Francis Xavier Gordon stories of 1934 and 1935. Of Kirby O'Donnell we are told that his "Irish love of a fight" cohabits with another passion: the East, which "long ago [stole] his heart and led him to wander afar from his own people," but he dims to a silhouette or demi-clone beside El Borak, whose backstory is bolstered not only by the past-life allusions sprinkled throughout his adventures but a compositional prehistory consisting of juvenilia starring "Frank Gordon."

Howard's richest, most revealing correspondences as a professional writer were with his fellow *Weird Tales* mainstays H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith and the Lovecraft Circle votary August Derleth. Accordingly, a relatively weirdness-free creation like Gordon is mostly just namechecked, as when Howard mentioned "struggling along with Conan, Breckinridge Elkins and El Borak" to August Derleth in February 1935. Or he isn't named at all, as when the Texan informed Lovecraft in May 1935 that he'd "been trying to break into some new markets specializing on the adventure angle. *Top-Notch* has bought four long stories from me, giving me the cover design on the last issue, and I'm trying to make it regularly." Regularity indeed beckoned when the toehold of the Kirby O'Donnell adventure "Swords of Shahrazar" in the October 1934 *Top-Notch* developed into a seeming stranglehold with Gordon's December 1934 print debut "The Daughter of Erlik Khan," "Hawk of the Hills" in June of 1935, and "Blood of the Gods" the following month. Otis Adelbert Kline, who acted as agent for *non-Weird Tales* submissions during the Texan's last years, also placed "Gold from Tatary" (published as "The Treasure of Tartary") in the January 1935 *Thrilling Adventures*, "Sons of the Hawk" (published as "The Country of the Knife") in the August 1936 *Complete Stories*, and "Son of the White Wolf" in the December 1936 *Thrilling Adventures*. As we know, tragedy saw to it that the last-named two stories appeared after Howard's death, and then "Swords of the Hills" and "Three-Bladed Doom" redefined what it meant to be posthumous: the former was not published until 1974 (as "The Lost Valley of Iskander"), while the latter languished until 1976.

Francis Xavier Gordon deserved better than such delays; for El Borak, "the Swift," speed is always of the essence, as Gordon dares both his foes and his fans to try and keep up. Character reveals itself in swordstrokes and snap-shots, with the Howard hero pitting himself against his enemies, against the clock, against the elements, against unwelcome urgencies like depleted ammunition and drained water-supplies, against the exhaustion

that crowds round when sleep is less attainable than Paradise, against the dragon-sickness that renders modern men, like the *dramatis personae* of ancient tales, feverish in the vicinity of treasure. These stories exemplify Hannah Arendt's fantastically intensified purity, or what Howard himself might style "the lean economy of the wolf." We find no monsters, give or take an admirably abominable Yeti, and no sorcery, save that so memorably encapsulated by Howard's epigram elsewhere appreciating the fact that "A good knife is always a hearty incantation." Streamlined, stripped-down situations prevail, so that Gordon force-marches himself from one paragraph of "Blood of the Gods" to the next "to kill or be killed — not for wealth, nor the love of a woman, nor an ideal, nor a dream, but for as much water as could be carried in a sheep-skin bag." In his Conanocentric 1983 REH biography *Dark Valley Destiny*, L. Sprague de Camp deemed stories of this sort "fun to read" although little more than exercises in which "hooves thunder, rifles crack, pistols bark, scimitars swish through the air, and blood spurts with gusto." Is that *really* all that's going on?

Of course not. For starters, the storyteller in question rejoices in a command of the English language that is never a hesitant request. Hurrying feet are "winged by hate and blood-lust." "Crumbling pinnacles and turrets of black stone" loom "like gaunt ghosts" in the predawn hour — Howard, predisposed to be a toppler of towers, can't resist foreshadowing the collapses of even natural, non-manmade spires. Someone else's character might get thirsty; El Borak is "bitten by the devils of thirst." And even in pick-up-the-pace overdrive, Howard remains irreducibly and unmistakably *Howard:* "Man's treachery is balanced by man's loyalty, at least in the barbaric hills where civilized sophistry has not crept in with its cult of timeserving." One has to have seen more than the keys of one's typewriter to note, "Men go mad on a slogan; conquerors have swept to empire, prophets to new world religions on a shouted phrase." A heroine's "overrefinement of civilization" might "instinctively [belittle] physical action," but

that attitude will be refuted and reprimanded with devastating thoroughness.

The *where* provides much of the *wherefore;* all but two of the El Borak stories take place in Afghanistan, a "leaner, fiercer world" prowled by a "wind knife-edged with ice," beneath stars like "points of chilled silver," where ravines "cut up the country horrid," as Kipling's Peachey Carnehan would say. War is waged across the world's roof, on which the encroaching clangor of swords can rouse eagles "to shrill hysteria." And when we do leave the Afghan mountains, it is for Arabian deserts so brazenly, blazingly inimical that another of Howard's heroines is tempted to shake "a triumphant fist at the rocky waste about her, as if at a sentient enemy, sullen and cheated of its prey." Such landscapes are inhospitable to the imperial but themselves imperious in that topographical extremes dictate behavioral extremes. Water is scarcer than mercy, but an "unquenchable thirst for adventure" can be slaked again and again.

Fatally easier to bite off than to chew, Afghanistan was surely created to undermine the overweening, to leave lasting bruises to match the regal purple of their attire. A bundle of tribal tribulations misperceived as a kingdom, the region stubbornly, sanguinarily resists the demands of whatever century the outside world seeks to impose: notably the twentieth, before that the nineteenth, and now the twenty-first.

Afghanistan demands attention not only as what Howard's north-of-Khyber mentor Talbot Mundy called "the home of contrasts, of blood-feuds that last until the last-but-one man dies, and of friendships that no crime or need or slander can efface," but as the land positioned by fate and geology "above" a golden subcontinent, from which perch it ceaselessly broods and breeds the warriors who might descend in human flashfloods, human avalanches. Writing to the east-of-Suez specialist E. Hoffmann Price on February 15, 1936, Howard confided, "My old interest in India has recently been revived by reading *Dreamers of Empire* by Pakenham and Achmed Abdullah. Fine, sneering, swashbuckling

biographies of such men as Sir Richard Burton, Henry Lawrence, John Nicholson, Chinese Gordon, etc."

We are perhaps justified in suspecting that his interest all along lay chiefly in Hind not just as the jewel in any empire's crown, but as a gem that at times seemed invitingly easy to pry loose from the crown with an Afghan tulwar. "India shall bleed for all the fat years she has lain unplundered," a character vows in *King of the Khyber Rifles*. For Howard, who wolfed down that Mundy novel and several others in June of 1923, and enjoyed readier access to his inner barbarian than the Englishman ever did, the Khyber Pass became as evocative a conduit/chokepoint and border/barrier between civilization and barbarism as Hadrian's Wall or his own Black River, briefly the westernmost edge of the Hyborian world. His head and heart lingered in "the Hills" throughout the summer of 1923; in his letters to his friend Tevis Clyde Smith, one of which he claimed originated in Kandahar, we catch him signing off as Kadour Akbar Khan and interpreting the supposed vulnerability of South Asia as a warning for North America: "When India turns from war to trade and becomes debauched the wild tribesmen of Afghanistan come down the Khyber Pass with torch and sword."

In an early Howard fragment, a character numbers among his past lives one in which "[he] led a wild, sword-wielding horde down the Khyber Pass into India," and the predator/prey dynamic between Afghanistan and India eventually became the borrowed backdrop for the 1933 Conan dazzler "The People of the Black Circle," in which the Cimmerian burns to unite the tribes of Afghulistan so as to plunder Vendhya. When the Gordon character reemerged that same year and was soon joined by Kirby O'Donnell, although they were not quite Men Who Would Be Athelstan King, a more responsible, "real-world" outlook required that "the overthrow of a rule outworn" be framed as a must-to-avoid. O'Donnell's surprise is glandular as he realizes "for once in his life a driving power mightier than his own desire." The tensions between Gordon's own heritage (not only American, one

of successful rebellion against imperial rule, but also Celtic, one of wrenchingly unsuccessful uprisings by highlanders and kerns on the recalcitrant fringes of the British Isles) and his exertions to prop up the Raj as the least worst organizing principle for the area helps to ensure that these stories are more than just the shoot-and-stab-'em-ups of L. Sprague de Camp's estimation.

The unsentimental education that produces El Borak is part of what Howard brings to the Great Game table, part of his demurral to Mundy's insistence in *King of the Khyber Rifles* that "The Khyber Pass is as much British as the air is an eagle's." In many ways the twentieth century jailed Gordon's creator, but his imagination won free with characters who shared the desire of Peachey Carnehan for "some other place where a man isn't crowded and can come to his own." Unlike his Howardian compatriots Esau Cairn (in *Almuric*) and John Garfield (in "The Thunder-Rider"), El Borak remains on the planet and in the present, but employs all his faculties along lines of excellence in a distant arena where he can be, if not quite a white barbarian, then at least an adjuster and adjudicator of the local barbarism. "No, this man was not degenerate; his plunging into native feuds and brawls indicated no retrogression," a Gordon-watcher concludes in "Hawk of the Hills." "It was simply the response of a primitive nature seeking its most natural environment." By implication his native land is now lost to him as a dismayingly unnatural environment, Aunt Sally on a continental scale, if we recall Huck Finn's closing defiance: "Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before."

El Borak returned just as Howard was westering, moving into a "Texican" or Western phase of his fictioneering. In the Gordon stories, the East serves as a West that cannot be "won" or "tamed," and the hero himself is that familiar figure described by Richard Slotkin in his *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in 20th Century America:* "A man who straddles the border between savagery and civilization…them and us." The possessor of hair

“straight and black as an Indian’s” and features as “immobile as the deserts he haunted,” Gordon has long since acquired “the patience of the red Indian, which transcends even the patience of the East.” His booted tread is no noisier than the moccasins of the original Americans.

“They say you are as stoical as the red Indians of your country,” Ivan Konaszevski, his Cossack near-nemesis, informs the Texan. In another story he hurls himself onto the vengeance trail, “no more foolhardy than his grandfather who single-handed trailed an Apache war-party for days through the Guadalupes, and returned to the settlement on the Pecos with scalps hanging from his belt.” But the grandson is as much an heir of the most famous Apache as of his own dogged grandpa: “Geronimo almost whipped an army with a handful of Apaches, and I was raised in his country. I’ve simply adopted his tactics,” he assures Geoffrey Willoughby in “Hawk of the Hills.” In another story, we watch as “manipulated with ragged cloak, balls of thick black smoke [roll] upward against the blue. It was the old Indian technique of Gordon’s native plains. “In what is almost our last glimpse of him, he is “running up the slope as the Apaches of his native southwest run.” Nothing else so legitimizes, nothing else so *Americanizes* an American hero (in the century-and-a-half since the surviving “real” Indians were for a time swept under the rug or onto reservations) as do Indian blood (witness David Morrell’s Rambo and Louis L’Amour’s Joseph Makatozi), Indian *belongingness*, or at least Indian skills.

The things Gordon carries with him always and the things he leaves behind both do much to explain how the American creator of a forcefully American character was able to trespass so often on the Northwest Frontier and get away scot-free, or Scots-Irish-free. And although Howard never visited Arabia or Afghanistan, he rarely ceased from exploring the aridities and altitudes of his psyche and the waste places of his own soul. His Afghan and Arabian scenery is spectacular but rarely specific; background is only obtrusive insofar as it superbly equips Gordon to dominate

each story's foreground. The military historian John Keegan sketched the archetypal Afghan in his article "The Ordeal of Afghanistan" as "master of the high ground, [one who] knows every draw, false crest, goat track, hidden cave, overhang, and pinnacle." The Gordon we meet has matched such mastery with the adaptability, absorptive capacity and attention to local detail that proved transferable from wild West to wilder East. In doing so he has effected a homecoming that perhaps exceeded his early hopes for his new surroundings; if home is where the heart is, then Francis Xavier Gordon is most at home when adventuring on the edge of precipices both literal and figurative.

When Mundy wrote of "the heart's desire for the cold and the snow and the cruelty — the dark nights and the shrieking storms and the savagery of the Land of the Knife," he may well have pointed an editor to the title "Sons of the Hawk" appeared under. And in his 2003 essay "Hyborian Genesis Part II" (see *The Bloody Crown of Conan*), Patrice Louinet reminded us that the American's Yasmeena ("The Daughter of Erlik Khan"), Yasmina ("The People of the Black Circle"), and Yasmeena (*Almuric*) differed from each other but were all daughters of Mundy's Yasmini, who, in one of the enduring images from *King of the Khyber Rifles*, smiles down upon dangerous men "as sweetly as the stars shine on a battle-field." The Englishman's Ismail ("He looked like a bearded ghoul out for an airing") is the progenitor of the Texan's Yar Ali Khan the Afridi. Howard's Shalizahr is "like a magic city of sorcerers, stolen from some fabled land and set down in this desert spot," and is also rather like Mundy's Khinjan Caves, "a very city of the spirits."

Yet *sic transit gloria Mundy;* Howard made room for himself on the turf the creator of Athelstan King and Jimgrim took over from Kipling by putting attitudinal distance between himself and the English author. Here it will be useful if we keep the title of Brian Taves' 2006 *Talbot Mundy, Philosopher of Adventure* in mind, and then recall what was in effect Howard's declaration of independence in a letter to Lovecraft: "For my part, the mystic

phase of the East has always interested me less than the material side — panoramas of war, rapine and conquest."

We need not accuse Howard of mentor-mauling to note that Mundyesque philosophical or mystical states of grace are brusquely exposed as a state of disgrace in the Gordon stories; witness Yasmeena's disillusionment in "The Daughter of Erlik Khan": "I had dreamed of a calm retreat of mystics, inhabited by philosophers. I found a haunt of bestial devils, ignorant of all but evil." Gordon himself expects to find "a hermit-philosopher, radiant with mellow wisdom" in "Blood of the Gods," but encounters "a filthy, naked madman." For all of Al Wazir's study of *The Bhagavad-Gita*, for all of his delvings in "strange religions and philosophies, seeking the answer to the riddle of Existence," events, violent events, elicit from him the admission "I can't help mankind by dreaming out here in the desert." Perhaps *mankind* is not to be helped at all, but individual men, women, and children can be saved or avenged as need be. Just as a good knife is a hearty incantation, a reliable pistol is a profound piece of philosophizing.

But a skeptical approach to mysticism does not entail forgoing the fantastic. The heroic fantasist Charles R. Saunders, whose Imaro saga is one of the most exciting examples of someone honoring Howard's legacy by applying powers of invention all his own, once published some thoughts on the earlier writer as *Robert E. Howard: Adventure Unlimited*. Is the adventure in any way *limited* in the El Borak stories because Afghanistan can't be Conan's Afghulistan? Is Francis Xavier Gordon's Asia more cramped and constrained than, say, Solomon Kane's Africa because the former is less supernatural? No. And conversely, some devotees of "pure" adventure will always wish to kick the fantastic out from under a writer like some gem-studded, exotically carved crutch, but if Howard's fantasy is powerful in no small part because of its realism, his "realistic" adventure stories often reach for a fantastic vocabulary and imagery. On the brink of sleep Gordon wonders "what grim spectacles [the mountains]

had witnessed since the beginning of Time, and what inhuman creatures had crept through them before Man was." In another story "a brooding weirdness about these ancient and forgotten caverns [rouses] uncanny speculations in Gordon's predominantly Celtic mind." The speculations go so far as to include "a hypothetical rock-python of enormous size" and "the fabled *djinn* of the Empty Abodes."

The fantastic remains in residence in Howard's time-slippage motif, as when Gordon can see himself as "a black-haired, black-eyed warrior from a far western isle, clad in the chain mail of a Crusader, striding through the intrigue-veiled mazes of an Assassin city." Far older vistas open up, too; after all, we are dealing with the work of an author who often intuited a predecessor-or-underlier East, as he wrote to H. P. Lovecraft in June of 1931:

> …I feel a dim sense of a vast epoch lurking *behind* the East of the early ages — a sort of huge lurking night behind the dawn represented by Egypt and by Babylon — a dim sense of gigantic black cities from whose ruins the first Babylon rose, a last mirrored remnant of an age lost in the huge deep gulf of night.

Always one to weigh rulers on the scale, find them wanting, and fling their kingdoms to the Medes and Persians, Howard reshaped Hubris and Nemesis in non-Greek, more forbiddingly sculpted guises. His ruination-reverie "Dreams of Nineveh" and the comeuppances in the poems "Belshazzar" and "The Blood of Belshazzar" seep into an unsparing verdict in "Three-Bladed Doom": "So might the lords of Nineveh and Babylon and Susa have reveled, heedless of the captives screaming and writhing and dying in the pits beneath their palaces — ignorant of the red destruction predestined at the maddened hands of those captives."

The supernatural version of "The Fire of Asshurbanipal" (see *The Horror Stories of Robert E. Howard*) was recently singled out by Lovecraft authority S. T. Joshi in *The Rise and Fall of the Cthulhu Mythos* as "perhaps Howard's most successful attempt to fuse his own swashbuckling action-adventure style with the Lovecraftian

idiom." But the story also succeeds in the absence of any creature feature, as in the version included in this book. Our old Howardian friends, human transience and temporal intransigence, are on hand for the climax of a long fascination on the writer's part. That fascination with the sinister, subjugation-by-atrocity mystique of ancient Assyria, imprinted on the Western imagination, however unfairly, by the Old Testament and Lord Byron's poem "The Destruction of Sennacherib," is at work in the Solomon Kane fragment "The Children of Asshur," the *asshuri* (blue-black-bearded, brutish Shemitish soldiery) of the Hyborian Age, and possibly the Nineveh-esque fate of the Acheronian capital of Python in *The Hour of the Dragon*. Outpost-turned-last-refuge for Assyrian refugees striving to outrun history, *Kara-Shehr* (as the Turks name it) is one of Howard's most unforgettable settings, a "black city of the *djinn*, deep in the hazes of a haunted desert." A character does well to suggest "the shadows of lost splendors" can be as phantasmally present as any ghost or *afreet*.

For Howard the wings of an angel of oblivion beat blackly over the mud-brick Mesopotamian magnificence that was, but Alexander was another, more *Western* matter. When he wrote his "The Hills of Kandahar" he obviously knew who it was that haunts the very place name Kandahar, even if the poem's vantage point is outside the former Alexandria in Arachosia, amid the mountains that outlasted the Macedonian and everyone else:

> They will be brooding when mankind is gone; The teeming tribes that scaled their barricades — Dim hordes that waxed at dusk and waned at dawn — Are but as snow that on their shoulders fades.

Even during his lifetime Alexander had one foot in history and one foot in myth, so it was fitting that he was in effect there to greet Francis Xavier Gordon in the first El Borak story, "Swords of the Hills." Howard was of course aware that Daniel Dravot's rather rickety claim to the throne of Kafiristan in "The Man Who Would Be King" is based on his being "the son of Alexander by Queen Semiramis," but another, *pre-Macedonian* alien-to-

Afghanistan city actually preceded the Attalus of "Swords" in his imagination. A fragment published as "The Lion Gate" in the 2007 collection *The Last of the Trunk* concerns Minoans fleeing the fall of Knossos in the Bronze Age who put Xenophon's later *anabasis* to shame: "Why should not those Ancients have won through to the high-flung reaches of the Himalayas and reared their city among the crags?" As killjoys, we can think of a few reasons why not, but the country's Alexandrian legends date back long before Kipling; as is attested by the British adventurer and agent Alexander "Bokhara" or "Sikandar" Burnes, whose fate it was to fare less well than El Borak in the alleys of Kabul, in his *Travels into Bokhara* (1834):

> I heard from these people a variety of particulars regarding the reputed descendants of Alexander the Great, which are yet said to exist in this neighborhood, and the valley of the Oxus, as well as the countries near the head of the Indus. The subject had occupied much of my attention, and a tea merchant of our small caravan had amused me on the road from Khooloom, with the received lineage of these Macedonians.

Alexander's experiences have been much on the minds of those receptive to cautionary tales since 1979, and even more since 2001. Both Frank L. Holt's nonfiction *Into the Land of Bones: Alexander the Great in Afghanistan* (2005) and Stephen Pressfield's hecatomb-in-novel-form *The Afghan Campaign* (2006) remind us that the Macedonian's conceptual breakthrough in terms of counterinsurgency was marrying Roxana and hence into the local warlord-nobility, an option that Queen Victoria, Leonid Brezhnev, and the second President Bush were perhaps remiss in ruling out. And that in turn is a reminder that history has played a trick on the stories collected here, or possibly enriched them beyond even Howard's hoards that function as "monstrous lodestone[s] drawing all the evil passions of men." What we might call Khyberspace currently occupies more of the American imagination than at any time since movies like *Lives of a Bengal*

Lancer and *The Charge of the Light Brigade* were released in 1935 and 1936 respectively.

The Gordon and O'Donnell adventures probably haven't been circulating overmuch among American or NATO troops in Afghanistan, unless yellowing paperbacks pounced upon in used bookstores or passed down from fathers and uncles made it into a kit-bag or three. Maybe that will now change, in which case we can predict a few double-takes when new readers learn that "The ameer [rules] the tribes after a fashion — with a dominance that [dare] not presume too far," while the followers of Othman el Aziz seek "death rather than life," or read about the "plague spot, sprawled in the high, bare hills, almost fabulous, beyond the reach of the ameer," where the black Tigers scheme. Gordon even refers to "the terrorist methods" of the Shaykhs Al Jebal. Perhaps they will reflect that while El Borak, who doesn't start vendettas, finishes them with blows that are crunchingly heavy, his "footprint" is light, lighter than a superpower's could ever be.

But here's hoping any and all readers also relish these adventures as *adventures*, and as demonstrations of Howard's galloping professionalism by the mid-thirties. "White men don't forget — not when there's loot in the offing," he observes in one story; any White Man's Burden mostly translates into white men burdened by the loot they seek to bear away. Ormond and Hawkston are both "beastly with cruel greed," but the latter villain is forced to share what amounts to a foxhole with Gordon, and however fleeting their snarling, suspicion-ridden solidarity, it is a golden opportunity for Howard to contrast his hero with another adventurer. Or note how much more *inhabited* Rub el Harami, the Abode of Thieves in "Sons of the Hawk," is than Yolgan in "The Daughter of Erlik Khan": the earlier enclave seems like so much papier-mache and plywood in comparison. Or the quantum leap in POV characters from Stuart Brent, who looks to El Borak for rescue, to Geoffrey Willoughby, who looks to the Texan for *compromise, a* willingness to renounce to-the-hilt vengeance. As he keeps his eyes, his ears, and his mind open,

Willoughby grows to rival Balthus in “Beyond the Black River” as a readerly stand-in, and his scenes with Gordon rank with the circumstantial alliance of Athelstane and Turlogh O’Brien in “The Gods of Bal-Sagoth” as a seriocomic collision of Saxon and Celt arranged by a writer who bled Gael-green in his affinities.

Gary Hoppenstand, a professor drawn to Howard’s work, has written, “Kirby O’Donnell constantly has to demonstrate his value as a hero by the strength of his hands and the grit of his teeth in the face of certain and terrible death, and only through his own mastery of the mechanics of death does he survive to the next story, to go through it all once more.” As Geoffrey Willoughby eyewitnesses, El Borak’s weapons-play is wizardly, but a note other than “the dry, strident, cruel cackling of the hills” is sounded in these stories. As the bodies pile up, so, sometimes, do the regrets. After one battle his eyes sweep “his phantom crew with a strange remorse,” and he says, “Sorry about it all.” In another story a pleasure garden-turned-abbatoir prompts the outcry “God!” from a man whose “soul [is] in revolt.” Few other Howard heroes would concern themselves with fetching water and binding wounds, or react to the butcher’s bill in “Son of the White Wolf” with the words, “A hundred better men than I have died today.”

That story’s damning assessment of the detestable ex-lieutenant Osman is “He thinks first of his own desires, and only later of the safety of his men,” and the would-be empire-builder is a fresh frontier in villainy for the El Borak series. “Son of the White Wolf” as a whole is a new departure for a grim destination. Suddenly it is 1917, rather than some indeterminate prewar year, a time when, as Mundy’s Yasmini might put it, “The West has the West by the throat.” Cossacks and other henchmen of the Czar making mischief in the hills now seem as quaint as a daguerrotype.

Geopolitical realities have become molten and malleable; as Gordon, who has descended from his old eyrie to the flatlands and the multilateral suicide pact of world war, comments, “The world is being made over here, as well as in Europe.” Osman is thinking

along similar lines, but he is acting as well as thinking. *"Senta*, Rinaldi. *Senta*. You and me, we've made a separate peace," Hemingway's Nick Adams, machine-gunned in the spine on the Italian Front, says to an even more wounded casualty in one of the most famous American reactions to World War One; in "Son of the White Wolf," Osman makes a separate war, a revolt within, but *against*, the Arab Revolt.

Now the Janus-faced iconography of "Three-Bladed Doom," in which the palace guards of Shalizahr tote rhinoceros-hide shields and gold-chased scimitars that "[contrast] curiously with the modern rifles in their hands and the cartridge-belts [around] their lean waists," intensifies as the summer thunder of British artillery competes for our attention with Osman's banner with a strange device: "the head of a white wolf — the battle-standard of most ancient Turan." Will the future be the past, an Osmaniacal, terribly simplified past purged of complexity and commiseration? In any event, "Son of the White Wolf" is our only foretaste of a possible future of the El Borak stories in which the shadows of the twentieth century might have lengthened and grown ever-chillier.

T. E. Lawrence, an offstage colleague of Gordon's in "White Wolf," wrote in a letter, "I am still puzzled as to how far the individual counts: a lot, I fancy, if he pushes the right way." We might suspect that with Gordon, as with Lawrence, the peace-making, promise-breaking years after 1917 will soon *shove back, forcefully*, but these stories remain adventures in which the individual continues to count a great deal. Richard Slotkin has argued that "heroes symbolize the possibility of successful action in the world," and Gordon, whose "strenuous nature" negates the "inert philosophy" of fatalism, actively succeeds whether in Afghanistan or Arabia.

El Borak speaks, in actions louder than his tersely effective words, to that part of readers that old Aunt Sally never manages to catch and "sivilize," and, it must be confessed, to that part of those of us who are Y-chromosomed that still stealthily dreams of being told, "Your soul is a whetted blade on which I feared I

might cut myself." Is it any wonder that the heroines of "The Daughter of Erlik Khan" and "Son of the White Wolf" fall short of being love interests for Gordon? A mortal-in-more-ways-than-one enemy of his ultimately whispers, "To the mistress of all true adventurers! To the Lady Death!" Has he found time to read Robert E. Howard's poetry? In "The Adventurer's Mistress," the speaker, who could well be Gustav Hunyadi, Kirby O'Donell, or El Borak, is troubador-true to his hooded lady. Lawlessly bedded rather than lawfully wedded though she may be, this Mistress basks in a faithfulness many wives would envy:

> But I'll not grudge the game, I trow,
> As I feel her kiss on my fading brow.
> For I hold her dance is the only joy
> That thrills the years and fails to cloy.
> Aye, I hold her measure above all treasure
> And I'll only laugh as she bends to destroy.

Steve Tompkins February 2009

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El Borak

Swords of the Hills
The Daughter of Erlik Khan
Three-Bladed Doom
Hawk of the Hills
Blood of the Gods
Sons of the Hawk
Son of the White Wolf

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Swords of the Hills

I

It was the stealthy clink of steel on stone that wakened Gordon. In the dim starlight a shadowy bulk loomed over him and something glinted in the lifted hand. Gordon went into action like a steel spring uncoiling. His left hand checked the descending wrist with its curved knife, and simultaneously he heaved upward and locked his right hand savagely on a hairy throat.

A gurgling gasp was strangled in that throat and Gordon, resisting the other's terrific plunges, hooked a leg about his knee and heaved him over and underneath. There was no sound except the rasp and thud of straining bodies. Gordon fought, as always, in grim silence, and no sound came from the straining lips of the man beneath. His right hand writhed in Gordon's grip; his left tore futilely at the wrist whose iron fingers drove deeper and deeper into the throat they grasped. That wrist felt like a mass of woven steel wires to the weakening fingers that clawed at it. Grimly Gordon maintained his position, driving all the power of his compact shoulders and corded

arms into his throttling fingers. He knew it was his life or that of the man who had crept up to stab him in the dark. In that unmapped corner of the Afghan mountains all fights were to the death. The tearing fingers relaxed. A convulsive shudder ran through the great body straining beneath the American; then it went limp.

Gordon slid off the corpse, in the deeper shadow of the great rocks among which he had been sleeping. Instinctively he felt under his arm to see if the precious package for which he had staked his life was still safe. Yes, it was there, that flat bundle of papers wrapped in oiled silk, that meant life or death to thousands. He listened. No sound broke the stillness. About him the slopes with their ledges and boulders rose gaunt and black in the starlight. It was the darkness before the dawn.

But he knew that men moved about him, out there among the rocks. His ears, whetted by years in wild places, caught stealthy sounds — the soft rasp of cloth over stones, the faint shuffle of sandalled feet. He could not see them, and he knew they could not see him, among the clustered boulders he had chosen for his sleeping site.

His left hand groped for his rifle, and he drew his revolver with his right. That short, deadly fight had made no more noise than the silent knifing of a sleeping man might have made. Doubtless his stalkers out yonder were awaiting some signal from the man they had sent in to murder their victim.

Gordon knew who these men were. He knew their leader was the man who had dogged him for hundreds of miles, determined he should not reach India with that silk-wrapped packet. Francis Xavier Gordon was known by repute from Stamboul to the China Sea; the Muhammadans called him El Borak, the Swift, and they feared and respected him. But in Gustav Hunyadi, renegade and international adventurer, Gordon had met his match. And he knew that now Hunyadi, out there in the night, was lurking with his Turkish killers. They had ferreted him out, at last.

Gordon glided out from among the boulders as silently as a great cat. No hillman, born and bred among those crags, could have avoided loose stones more skillfully or picked his way more carefully. He headed southward, because that was the direction in which lay his ultimate goal. Doubtless he was completely surrounded.

His soft native sandals made no noise, and in his dark hillman's garb he was all but invisible. In the pitch-black shadow of an overhanging cliff, he suddenly sensed a human presence ahead of him. A voice hissed, a European tongue framing the Turki words: "Ali! Is that you? Is the dog dead? Why did you not call me?"

Gordon struck savagely in the direction of the voice. His pistol barrel crunched glancingly against a human skull, and a man groaned and crumpled. All about rose a sudden clamor of voices, the rasp of leather on rock. A stentorian voice began shouting, with a note of panic.

Gordon cast stealth to the winds. With a bound he cleared the writhing body before him, and sped off down the slope. Behind him rose a chorus of yells as the men in hiding glimpsed his shadowy figure racing through the starlight. Jets of orange cut the darkness, but the bullets whined high and wide. Gordon's flying shape was sighted but an instant, then the shadowy gulfs of the night swallowed it up. His enemies raved like foiled wolves in their bewildered rage. Once again their prey had slipped like an eel through their fingers and was gone.

So thought Gordon as he raced across the plateau beyond the clustering cliffs. They would be hot after him, with hillmen who could trail a wolf across naked rocks, but with the start he had — even with the thought the earth gaped blackly before him. Even his steel-trap quickness could not save him. His grasping hands caught only thin air as he plunged downward, to strike his head with stunning force at the bottom.

When he regained his senses a chill dawn was whitening the sky. He sat up groggily and felt his head, where a large lump was clotted

with dried blood. It was only by chance that his neck was not broken. He had fallen into a ravine, and during the precious time he should have employed in flight, he was lying senseless among the rocks at the bottom.

Again he felt for the packet under his native shirt, though he knew it was fastened there securely. Those papers were his death-warrant, which only his skill and wit could prevent being executed. Men had laughed when Francis Xavier Gordon had warned them that the devil's own stew was bubbling in Central Asia, where a satanic adventurer was dreaming of an outlaw empire.

To prove his assertion, Gordon had gone into Turkistan, in the guise of a wandering Afghan. Years spent in the Orient had given him the ability to pass himself for a native anywhere. He had secured proof no one could ignore or deny, but he had been recognized at last. He had fled for his life, and for more than his life, then, and Hunyadi, the renegade who plotted the destruction of nations, was hot on his heels, clear across the steppes, through the foothills, and up into the mountains where Gordon had thought at last to throw him off. But he had failed. The Hungarian was a human bloodhound. Wary, too, as shown by his sending his craftiest slayer in to strike a blow in the dark.

Gordon found his rifle and began the climb out of the ravine. Under his left arm was proof that would make certain officials wake up and take steps to prevent the atrocious thing that Gustav Hunyadi planned. It was letters to various Central Asian chiefs, signed and sealed with the Hungarian's own hand, and it revealed his whole plot to embroil Central Asia in a religious war and send howling hordes of fanatics against the Indian border. It was a plan for plundering on a staggering scale. That package *must* reach Fort Ali Masjid! With all his iron will Francis Xavier Gordon was determined it should; with equal resolution Gustav Hunyadi was determined it should not. In the clash of two such steely temperaments, kingdoms shake and Death reaps a red harvest.

Dirt crumbled and pebbles rattled down as Gordon worked his way up the sloping side of the ravine, but presently he clambered

over the edge and cast a quick look about him. He was on a narrow plateau, pitched among giant slopes which rose somberly above it. To the south showed the mouth of a narrow gorge, walled by rocky cliffs. In that direction he hurried.

He had not gone a dozen steps when a rifle cracked behind him. Even as the wind of the bullet fanned his cheek, Gordon dropped flat behind a boulder, a sense of futility tugging at his heart. He could never escape Hunyadi. This chase would end only when one of them was dead. In the increasing light he saw figures moving among the boulders along the slopes to the northwest of the plateau. He had lost his chance of escaping under cover of darkness, and now it looked like a finish fight.

He thrust forward his rifle barrel. Too much to hope that that blind blow in the dark had killed Hunyadi; the man had as many lives as a cat. A bullet splattered on the boulder close to his elbow. He had seen a tongue of flame lick out, marking the spot where the sniper lurked. He watched those rocks, and when a head and part of an arm and shoulder came up with a rifle, Gordon fired. It was a long shot, but the man reared upright and pitched forward across the rock that had sheltered him.

More bullets came, spattering Gordon's refuge. Up on the slopes, where the big boulders poised breathtakingly, he saw his enemies moving like ants, wriggling from ledge to ledge. They were spread out in a wide ragged semicircle, trying to surround him again, and he did not have enough ammunition to stop them. He dared shoot only when fairly certain of scoring a hit. He dared not make a break for the gorge behind him. He would be riddled before he could reach it. It looked like trail's end for him, and while Gordon had faced death too often to fear it greatly, the thought that those papers would never reach their destination filled him with black despair.

A bullet whining off his boulder from a new angle made him crouch lower, seeking the marksman. He glimpsed a white turban, high up on the slope, above the others. From that position the Turk could drop bullets directly into Gordon's covert.

The American could not shift his position, because a dozen other rifles nearer at hand were covering it; and he could not stay where he was. One of those dropping slugs would find him sooner or later. But the Ottoman decided that he saw a still better position, and risked a shift, trusting to the long uphill range. He did not know Gordon as Hunyadi knew him.

The Hungarian, further down the slope, yelled a fierce command, but the Turk was already in motion, headed for another ledge, his garments flapping about him. Gordon's bullet caught him in mid-stride. With a wild cry he staggered, fell headlong and crashed against a poised boulder. He was a heavy man, and the impact of his hurtling body toppled the rock from its unstable base. It rolled down the slope, dislodging others as it came. Dirt rattled in widening streams about it.

Men began recklessly to break cover. Gordon saw Hunyadi spring up and run obliquely across the slope, out of the path of the sliding rocks. The tall supple figure was unmistakable, even in Turkish garb. Gordon fired and missed, as he always seemed to miss the man, and then there was no time to fire again. The whole slope was in motion now, thundering down in a bellowing, grinding torrent of stones and dirt and boulders. The Turks were fleeing after Hunyadi, screaming: *"Ya Allah!"*

Gordon sprang up and raced for the mouth of the gorge. He did not look back. He heard above the roaring the awful screams that marked the end of men caught and crushed and ground to bloody shreds under the rushing tons of shale and stone. He dropped his rifle; every ounce of extra burden counted now. A deafening roar was in his ears as he gained the mouth of the gorge and flung himself about the beetling jut of the cliff. He crouched there, flattened against the wall, and through the gorge mouth roared a welter of dirt and rocks, boulders bouncing and tumbling, rebounding thunderously from the sides and hurtling on down the sloping gut. Yet, it was only a trickle of the avalanche which was diverted into the gorge. The main bulk of it thundered on down the mountain.

II

Gordon pulled away from the cliff that had sheltered him. He stood knee deep in loose dirt and broken stones. A flying splinter of stone had cut his face. The roar of the landslide was followed by an unearthly silence. Looking back on to the plateau, he saw a vast litter of broken earth, shale and rocks. Here and there an arm or a leg protruded, bloody and twisted, to mark where a human victim had been caught by the torrent. Of Hunyadi and the survivors there was no sign.

But Gordon was a fatalist where the satanic Hungarian was concerned. He felt quite sure that Hunyadi had survived, and would be upon his trail again as soon as he could collect his demoralized followers. It was likely that he would recruit the natives of these hills to his service. The man's power among the followers of Islam was little short of marvelous.

So Gordon turned hurriedly down the gorge. Rifle, pack of supplies, all were lost. He had only the garments on his body and the pistol at his hip. Starvation in these barren mountains was a haunting threat, if he escaped being butchered by the wild tribes which inhabited them. There was about one chance in ten thousand of his ever getting out alive. But he had known it was a desperate quest when he started, and long odds had never balked Francis Xavier Gordon, once of El Paso, Texas, and now for years soldier of fortune in the outlands of the world.

The gorge twisted and bent between tortuous walls. The split-off arm of the avalanche had quickly spent its force there, but Gordon still saw the slanting floor littered with boulders which had tumbled down from the higher levels. And suddenly he stopped short, his pistol snapping to a level.

On the ground before him lay a man such as he had never seen in the Afghan mountains or elsewhere. He was young, but tall and strong, clad in short silk breeches, tunic and sandals, and girdled with a broad belt which supported a curved sword.

His hair caught Gordon's attention. Blue eyes, such as the youth had, were not uncommon in the hills; but his hair was yellow, bound about his temples with a band of red cloth, and falling in a square-cut mane nearly to his shoulders. He was clearly no Afghan. Gordon remembered tales he had heard of a tribe living in these mountains somewhere who were neither Afghans nor Muhammadans. Had he stumbled upon a member of that legendary race?

The youth was vainly trying to draw his sword. He was pinned down by a boulder which had evidently caught him as he raced for the shelter of the cliff.

"Slay me and be done with it, you Moslem dog!" he gritted in Pushtu.

"I won't harm you," answered Gordon. "I'm no Moslem. Lie still. I'll help you if I can. I have no quarrel with you."

The heavy stone lay across the youth's leg in such a way that he could not extricate the member.

"Is your leg broken?" Gordon asked.

"I think not. But if you move the stone it will grind it to shreds."

Gordon saw that he spoke the truth. A depression on the under side of the stone had saved the youth's limb, while imprisoning it. If he rolled the boulder either way, it would crush the member.

"I'll have to lift it straight up," he grunted.

"You can never do it," said the youth despairingly. "Ptolemy himself could scarcely lift it, and you are not nearly so big as he."

Gordon did not pause to inquire who Ptolemy might be, nor to explain that strength is not altogether a matter of size alone. His own thews were like masses of knit steel wires.

Yet he was not at all sure that he could lift that boulder, which, while not so large as many which had rolled down the gorge, was yet bulky enough to make the task look dubious. Straddling the prisoner's body, he braced his legs wide, spread his arms and gripped the big stone. Putting all his corded sinews and his scientific

knowledge of weight-lifting into his effort, he uncoiled his strength in a smooth, mighty expansion of power.

His heels dug into the dirt, the veins in his temples swelled, and unexpected knots of muscles sprang out on his straining arms. But the great stone came up steadily without a jerk or waver, and the man on the ground drew his leg clear and rolled away.

Gordon let the stone fall and stepped back, shaking the perspiration from his face. The other worked his skinned, bruised leg gingerly, then looked up and extended his hand in a curiously un-Oriental gesture.

"I am Bardylis of Attalus," he said. "My life is yours!"

"Men call me El Borak," answered Gordon, taking his hand. They made a strong contrast: the tall, rangy youth in his strange garb, with his white skin and yellow hair, and the American, shorter, more compactly built, in his tattered Afghan garments, and his sun-darkened skin. Gordon's hair was straight and black as an Indian's, and his eyes were black as his hair.

"I was hunting on the cliffs," said Bardylis. "I heard shots and was going to investigate them, when I heard the roar of the avalanche and the gorge was filled with flying rocks. You are no Pathan, despite your name. Come to my village. You look like a man who is weary and has lost his way."

"Where is your village?"

"Yonder, down the gorge and beyond the cliffs." Bardylis pointed southward. Then, looking over Gordon's shoulder, he cried out. Gordon wheeled. High up on the beetling gorge wall, a turbaned head was poked from behind a ledge. A dark face stared down wildly. Gordon ripped out his pistol with a snarl, but the face vanished and he heard a frantic voice yelling in guttural Turki. Other voices answered, among which the American recognized the strident accents of Gustav Hunyadi. The pack was at his heels again. Undoubtedly they had seen Gordon take refuge in the gorge, and as soon as the boulders ceased tumbling, had traversed the torn slope

and followed the cliffs where they would have the advantage of the man below.

But Gordon did not pause to ruminate. Even as the turbaned head vanished, he wheeled with a word to his companion, and darted around the next bend in the canyon. Bardylis followed without question, limping on his bruised leg, but moving with sufficient alacrity. Gordon heard his pursuers shouting on the cliff above and behind him, heard them crashing recklessly through stunted bushes, dislodging pebbles as they ran, heedless of everything except their desire to sight their quarry.

But the pursuers had one advantage, the fugitives had another. They could follow the slightly slanting floor of the gorge more swiftly than the others could run along the uneven cliffs, with their broken edges and jutting ledges. They had to climb and scramble, and Gordon heard their maledictions growing fainter in the distance behind him. When they emerged from the further mouth of the gorge, they were far in advance of Hunyadi's killers.

But Gordon knew that the respite was brief. He looked about him. The narrow gorge had opened out onto a trail which ran straight along the crest of a cliff that fell away sheer three hundred feet into a deep valley, hemmed in on all sides by gigantic precipices. Gordon looked down and saw a stream winding among dense trees far below, and further on, what seemed to be stone buildings among the groves.

Bardylis pointed to the latter.

"There is my village!" he said excitedly. "If we could get into the valley we would be safe! This trail leads to the pass at the southern end, but it is five miles distant!"

Gordon shook his head. The trail ran straight along the top of the cliff and afforded no cover. "They'll run us down and shoot us like rats at long range, if we keep to this path."

"There is one other way!" cried Bardylis. "Down the cliff, at this very point! It is a secret way, and none but a man of my people has

ever followed it, and then only when hard pressed. There are handholds cut into the rock. Can you climb down?"

"I'll try," answered Gordon, sheathing his pistol. To try to go down those towering cliffs looked like suicide, but it was sure death to try to outrun Hunyadi's rifles along the trail. At any minute he expected the Magyar and his men to break cover.

"I will go first and guide you," said Bardylis rapidly, kicking off his sandals and letting himself over the cliff edge. Gordon did likewise and followed him. Clinging to the sharp lip of the precipice, Gordon saw a series of small holes pitting the rock. He began the descent slowly, clinging like a fly to a wall. It was hair-raising work, and the only thing that made it possible at all was the slight convex slant of the cliff at that point. Gordon had made many a desperate climb during his career, but never one which put such strain on nerve and thew. Again and again only the grip of a finger stood between him and death. Below him Bardylis toiled downward, guiding and encouraging him, until the youth finally dropped to the earth and stood looking tensely up at the man above him.

Then he shouted, with a note of strident fear in his voice. Gordon, still twenty feet from the bottom, craned his neck upward. High above him he saw a bearded face peering down at him, convulsed with triumph. Deliberately the Turk sighted downward with a pistol, then laid it aside and caught up a heavy stone, leaning far over the edge to aim its downward course. Clinging with toes and nails, Gordon drew and fired upward with the same motion. Then he flattened himself desperately against the cliff and clung on.

The man above screamed and pitched headfirst over the brink. The rock rushed down, striking Gordon a glancing blow on the shoulder, then the writhing body hurtled past and struck with a sickening concussion on the earth below. A voice shouting furiously high above announced the presence of Hunyadi at last, and Gordon slid and tumbled recklessly the remaining distance, and, with Bardylis, ran for the shelter of the trees.

A glance backward and upward showed him Hunyadi crouching on the cliff, leveling a rifle, but the next instant Gordon and Bardylis were out of sight, and Hunyadi, apparently dreading an answering shot from the trees, made a hasty retreat with the four Turks who were the survivors of his party.

III

"You saved my life when you showed me that path," said Gordon.

Bardylis smiled. "Any man of Attalus could have shown you the path, which we call the Road of the Eagles; but only a hero could have followed it. From what land comes my brother?"

"From the west," answered Gordon; "from the land of America, beyond Frankistan and the sea."

Bardylis shook his head. "I have never heard of it. But come with me. My people are yours henceforth."

As they moved through the trees, Gordon scanned the cliffs in vain for some sign of his enemies. He felt certain that neither Hunyadi, bold as he was, nor any of his companions would try to follow them down "the Road of the Eagles." They were not mountaineers; including Hunyadi, they were more at home in the saddle than on a hill path. They would seek some other way into the valley. He spoke his thoughts to Bardylis.

"They will find death," answered the youth grimly. "The Pass of the King, at the southern end of the valley, is the only entrance. Men guard it with matchlocks night and day. The only strangers who enter the Valley of Iskander are traders, merchants with pack-mules."

Gordon inspected his companion curiously, aware of a certain tantalizing sensation of familiarity he could not place.

"Who are your people?" he asked. "You are not an Afghan. You do not look like an Oriental at all."

“We are the Sons of Iskander,” answered Bardylis. “When the great conqueror came through these mountains, long ago, he built the city we call Attalus, and left hundreds of his soldiers and their women in it. Iskander marched westward again, and after a long while word came that he was dead and his empire divided. But the people of Iskander abode here, unconquered. Many times we have slaughtered the Afghan dogs who came against us.”

Light came to Gordon, illuminating that misplaced familiarity. Iskander — Alexander the Great, who conquered this part of Asia and left colonies behind him. This boy’s profile was classic Grecian, such as Gordon had seen in sculptured marble, and the names he spoke were Grecian. Undoubtedly he was the descendant of some Macedonian soldier who had followed the Great Conqueror on his invasion of the East.

To test the matter, he spoke to Bardylis in ancient Greek, one of the many languages, modern and obsolete, he had picked up in his varied career. The youth cried out with pleasure.

“You speak our tongue!” he exclaimed, in the same language. “Not in a thousand years has a stranger come to us with our own speech on his lips. We converse with the Moslems in their own tongue, and they know nothing of ours. Surely you, too, are a Son of Iskander?”

Gordon shook his head, wondering how he could explain his knowledge of the tongue to this youth who knew nothing of the world outside the hills. “My ancestors were neighbors of the people of Alexander,” he said at last. “So many of my people speak their language.”

They were approaching the stone roofs which shone through the trees, and Gordon saw that Bardylis’ “village” was a substantial town, surrounded by a wall, and so plainly the work of long dead Grecian architects that he felt like a man who had wandered into a past and forgotten age.

Outside the walls, men tilled the thin soil with primitive implements, and herded sheep and cattle. A few horses grazed along the bank of the stream which meandered through the valley. All the men, like Bardylis, were tall and fair-haired. They dropped their work and came running up, staring at the black-haired stranger in hostile surprize, until Bardylis reassured them.

“It is the first time any but a captive or a trader has entered the valley in centuries,” said Bardylis to Gordon. “Say nothing till I bid you. I wish to surprize my people with your knowledge. Zeus, they

will gape when they hear a stranger speak to them in their own tongue!"

The gate in the wall hung open and unguarded, and Gordon noticed that the wall itself was in a poor state of repair. Bardylis remarked that the guard in the narrow pass at the end of the valley was sufficient protection, and that no hostile force had ever reached the city itself. They passed through and walked along a broad paved street, in which yellow-haired people in tunics, men, women and children, went about their tasks much like the Greeks of two thousand years ago, among buildings which were duplicates of the structures of ancient Athens.

A crowd quickly formed about them, but Bardylis, bursting with glee and importance, gave them no satisfaction. He went straight toward a large edifice near the center of the town and, mounting the broad steps, came into a large chamber where several men, more richly dressed than the common people, sat casting dice on a small table before them. The crowd swarmed in after them, and thronged the doorway eagerly. The chiefs ceased their dice game, and one, a giant with a commanding air, demanded: "What do you wish, Bardylis? Who is this stranger?"

"A friend of Attalus, oh Ptolemy, king of the valley of Iskander," answered Bardylis. "He speaks the tongue of Iskander!"

"What tale is this?" harshly demanded the giant.

"Let them hear, brother!" Bardylis directed triumphantly.

"I come in peace," said Gordon briefly, in archaic Greek. "I am called El Borak, but I am no Moslem."

A murmur of surprise went up from the throng, and Ptolemy fingered his chin and scowled suspiciously. He was a magnificently built man, clean shaven like all his tribesmen, and handsome, but his visage was moody.

He listened impatiently while Bardylis related the circumstances of his meeting with Gordon, and when he told of the American lifting the stone that pinned him down, Ptolemy frowned and involuntarily flexed his own massive thews. He seemed ill-pleased at

the approval with which the people openly greeted the tale. Evidently these descendants of Grecian athletes had as much admiration for physical perfection as had their ancient ancestors, and Ptolemy was vain of his prowess.

“How could he lift such a stone?” the king broke in. “He is of no great size. His head would scarcely top my chin.”

“He is mighty beyond his stature, oh king,” retorted Bardylis. “Here is the bruise on my leg to prove I tell the truth. He lifted the stone I could not move, and he came down the Road of the Eagles, which few even among the Attalans have dared. He has traveled far and fought men, and now he would feast and rest.”

“See to it then,” grunted Ptolemy contemptuously, turning back to his dice game. “If he is a Moslem spy, your head shall answer for it.”

“I stake my head gladly on his honesty, oh king!” answered Bardylis proudly; then taking Gordon’s arm, he said softly, “Come my friend. Ptolemy is short of patience and scant of courtesy. Pay no heed to him. I will take you to the house of my father.”

As they pushed their way through the crowd, Gordon’s gaze picked out an alien countenance among the frank, blond faces — a thin, swarthy visage, whose black eyes gleamed avidly on the American. The man was a Tajik, with a bundle on his back. When he saw he was being scrutinized he smirked and bobbed his head servilely. There was something familiar about the gesture.

“Who is that man?” Gordon asked.

“Abdullah, a Moslem dog whom we allow to enter the valley with beads and mirrors and such trinkets as our women love; we trade ore and wine and skins for them.”

Gordon remembered the fellow now — a shifty character who used to hang around Peshawur, and was suspected of smuggling rifles up the Khyber Pass. But when he turned and looked back, the dark face had vanished in the crowd. However, there was no reason to fear Abdullah, even if the man recognized him. The Tajik could not know of the papers he carried. Gordon felt that the people of Attalus were friendly to the friend of Bardylis, though the youth had

plainly roused Ptolemy's jealous vanity by his praise of Gordon's strength.

Bardylis conducted Gordon down the street to a large stone house with a pillared portico, where he proudly displayed his friend to his father, a venerable patriarch called Perdiccas, and his mother, a tall, stately woman, well along in years. The Attalans certainly did not keep their women in seclusion like the Moslems. Gordon saw Bardylis' sisters, robust blond beauties, and his young brother. The American could scarcely suppress a smile at the strangeness of it all, being ushered into the every-day family life of two thousand years ago. These people were definitely not barbarians; lower, undoubtedly, in the cultural scale than their Hellenic ancestors, they were still more highly civilized by far than their fierce Afghan neighbors.

Their interest in their guest was genuine, but none save Bardylis showed much interest in the world outside their valley. Presently the youth led Gordon into an inner chamber and set food and wine before him. The American ate and drank ravenously, suddenly aware of the lean days that had preceded this feast. While he ate, Bardylis talked, but he did not speak of the men who had been pursuing Gordon. Evidently he supposed them to have been Afghans of the surrounding hills, whose hostility was proverbial. Gordon learned that no man of Attalus had ever been more than a day's journey away from the valley. The ferocity of the hill tribes all about them had isolated them from the world completely.

When Gordon at last expressed a desire for sleep, Bardylis left him alone, assuring him that he would not be disturbed. The American was somewhat disturbed to find that there was no door to his chamber, merely a curtain drawn across an archway. Bardylis had said there were no thieves in Attalus, but caution was so much a natural part of Gordon that he found himself a prey to uneasiness. The room opened onto a corridor, and the corridor, he believed, gave onto an outer door. The people of Attalus apparently did not find it necessary to safeguard their dwellings; but though a native might sleep in safety, that might not apply to a stranger.

Finally Gordon drew aside the couch which formed the main piece of furniture for the chamber, and making sure no spying eyes were on him, he worked loose one of the small stone blocks which composed the wall. Taking the silk-bound packet from his shirt, he thrust it into the aperture, pushed back the stone as far as it would go, and replaced the couch.

Stretching himself, then, upon the couch, he fell to evolving plans for escape with his life and those papers which meant so much to the peace of Asia. He was safe enough in the valley, but he knew Hunyadi would wait for him outside with the patience of a cobra. He could not stay here forever. He would scale the cliffs some dark night and bolt for it. Hunyadi would undoubtedly have all the tribes in the hills after him, but he would trust to luck and his good right arm, as he had so often before. The wine he had drunk was potent; weariness after the long flight weighted his limbs. Gordon's meditations merged into dream. He slept deeply and long.

IV

When Gordon awoke it was in utter darkness. He knew that he had slept for many hours, and night had fallen. Silence reigned over the house, but he had been awakened by the soft swish of the curtains over the doorway.

He sat up on his couch and asked: "Is that you, Bardylis?"

A voice grunted, "Yes." Even as he was electrified by the realization that the voice was *not* that of Bardylis, something crashed down on his head, and a deeper blackness, shot with fire-sparks, engulfed him.

When he regained consciousness, a torch dazzled his eyes, and in its glow he saw three men — burly, yellow-haired men of Attalus with faces more stupid and brutish than any he had yet seen. He was lying on a stone slab in a bare chamber, whose crumbling, cobwebbed walls were vaguely illumined by the gutturing torch. His arms were bound, but not his legs. The sound of a door opening

made him crane his neck, and he saw a stooped, vulture-like figure enter the room. It was Abdullah, the Tajik.

He looked down on the American with his rat-like features twisted in a venomous grin.

“Low lies the terrible El Borak!” he taunted. “Fool! I knew you the instant I saw you in the palace of Ptolemy.”

“You have no feud with me,” growled Gordon.

“A friend of mine has,” answered the Tajik. “That is nothing to me, but it shall gain me profit. It is true you have never harmed me, but I have always feared you. So when I saw you in the city, I gathered my goods and hastened to depart, not knowing what you did here. But beyond the pass I met the *Feringhi* Hunyadi, and he asked me if I had seen you in the valley of Iskander, whither you had fled to escape him. I answered that I had, and he urged me to help him steal into the valley and take from you certain documents he said you stole from him.

“But I refused, knowing that these Attalan devils would kill me if I tried to smuggle a stranger into Iskander, and Hunyadi went back into the hills with his four Turks, and the horde of ragged Afghans he has made his friends and allies. When he had gone I returned to the valley, telling the guardsmen at the pass that I feared the Pathans.

“I persuaded these three men to aid me in capturing you. None will know what became of you, and Ptolemy will not trouble himself about you, because he is jealous of your strength. It is an old tradition that the king of Attalus must be the strongest man in the city. Ptolemy would have killed you himself, in time. But I will attend to that. I do not wish to have you on my trail, after I have taken from you the papers Hunyadi wishes. He shall have them ultimately — if he is willing to pay enough!” He laughed, a high, cackling laugh, and turned to the stolid Attalans. “Did you search him?”

“We found nothing,” a giant rumbled.

Abdullah *tck-tck’ed* his teeth in annoyance.

“You do not know how to search a *Feringhi*. Here, I will do it myself.”

He ran a practiced hand over his captive, scowling as his search was unrewarded. He tried to feel under the American’s arm-pits, but Gordon’s arms were bound so closely to his sides that this was impossible.

Abdullah frowned worriedly, and drew a curved dagger.

“Cut loose his arms,” he directed, “then all three of you lay hold on him; it is like letting a leopard out of his cage.”

Gordon made no resistance and was quickly spread-eagled on the slab, with a big Attalan at each arm and one at his legs. They held him closely, but seemed skeptical of Abdullah’s repeated warnings concerning the stranger’s strength.

The Tajik again approached his prisoner, lowering his knife as he reached out. With a dynamic release of coiled steel muscles Gordon wrenched his legs free from the grasp of the careless Attalan and drove his heels terrifically into Abdullah’s breast. Had his feet been booted they would have caved in the Tajik’s breast bone. As it was, the merchant shot backward with an agonized grunt, and struck the floor flat on his shoulders.

Gordon had not paused. That same terrific lunge had torn his left arm free, and heaving up on the slab, he smashed his left fist against the jaw of the man who gripped his right arm. The impact was like that of a caulking hammer, and the Attalan went down like a butchered ox. The other two lunged in, hands grasping. Gordon threw himself over the slab to the floor on the other side, and as one of the warriors lunged around it, he caught the Attalan’s wrist, wheeled, jerking the arm over his shoulder, and hurled the man bodily over his head. The Attalan struck the floor headfirst with an impact that knocked wind and consciousness out of him together.

The remaining kidnaper was more wary. Seeing the terrible strength and blinding speed of his smaller foe, he drew a long knife and came in cautiously, seeking an opportunity for a mortal thrust. Gordon fell back, putting the slab between himself and that

glimmering blade, while the other circled warily after him. Suddenly the American stooped and ripped a similar knife from the belt of the man he had first felled. As he did so, the Attalan gave a roar, cleared the slab with a lion-like bound, and slashed in mid-air at the stooping American.

Gordon crouched still lower and the gleaming blade whistled over his head. The man hit the floor feet-first, off balance, and tumbled forward, full into the knife that swept up in Gordon's hand. A strangled cry was wrung from the Attalan's lips as he felt himself impaled on the long blade, and he dragged Gordon down with him in his death struggles.

Tearing free from his weakening embrace, Gordon rose, his garments smeared with his victim's blood, the red knife in his hand. Abdullah staggered up with a croaking cry, his face green with pain. Gordon snarled like a wolf and sprang toward him, all his murderous passion fully roused. But the sight of that dripping knife and the savage mask of Gordon's face galvanized the Tajik. With a scream he sprang for the door, knocking the torch from its socket as he passed. It hit the floor, scattering sparks and plunging the room into darkness, and Gordon caromed blindly into the wall.

When he righted himself and found the door, the room was empty except for himself and the Attalans, dead or senseless.

Emerging from the chamber, he found himself in a narrow street, with the stars just fading for dawn. The building he had just quitted was dilapidated and obviously deserted. Down the narrow way he saw the house of Perdiccas. So he had not been carried far. Evidently his abductors had anticipated no interference. He wondered how much of a hand Bardylis had had in the plot. He did not like to think that the youth had betrayed him. But in any event, he would have to return to the house of Perdiccas, to obtain the packet he had concealed in the wall. He went down the street, still feeling a bit sick and giddy from that blow that had knocked him senseless, now that the fire of battle had cooled in his veins. The street was deserted. It seemed, indeed, more like an alley than a street, running between the backs of the houses.

As he approached the house, he saw someone running toward him. It was Bardylis, and he threw himself on Gordon with a cry of relief that was not feigned.

“Oh, my brother!” he exclaimed. “What has happened? I found your chamber empty a short time ago, and blood on your couch. Are you unhurt? Nay, there is a cut upon your scalp!”

Gordon explained in a few words, saying nothing of the letters. He allowed Bardylis to suppose that Abdullah had been a personal enemy, bent on revenge. He trusted the youth now, but there was no need to disclose the truth of the packet.

Bardylis whitened with fury. “What a shame upon my house!” he cried. “Last night that dog Abdullah made my father a present of a great jug of wine, and we all drank except yourself, who were slumbering. I know now the wine was drugged. We slept like dogs.

“Because you were our guest, I posted a man at each outer door last night, but they fell asleep because of the wine they had drunk. A few minutes ago, searching for you, I found the servant who was posted at the door which opens into this alley from the corridor that runs past your chamber. His throat had been cut. It was easy for them to creep along that corridor and into your chamber while we slept.”

Back in the chamber, while Bardylis went to fetch fresh garments, Gordon retrieved the packet from the wall and stowed it under his belt. In his waking hours he preferred to keep it on his person.

Bardylis returned then with the breeches, sandals and tunic of the Attalans, and while Gordon donned them, gazed in admiration at the American’s bronzed and sinewy torso, devoid as it was of the slightest trace of surplus flesh.

Gordon had scarcely completed his dressing when voices were heard without, the tramp of men resounded through the hall, and a group of yellow-haired warriors appeared at the doorway, with swords at their sides. Their leader pointed to Gordon, and said: “Ptolemy commands that this man appear at once before him, in the hall of justice.”

“What is this?” exclaimed Bardylis. “El Borak is my guest!”

“It is not my part to say,” answered the chief. “I but carry out the commands of our king.”

Gordon laid a restraining hand on Bardylis’s arm. “I will go. I want to see what business Ptolemy has with me.”

“I, too, will go,” said Bardylis, with a snap of his jaws. “What this portends I do not know. I do know that El Borak is my friend.”

The sun was not yet rising as they strode down the white street toward the palace, but people were already moving about, and many of them followed the procession.

Mounting the broad steps of the palace, they entered a wide hall, flanked with lofty columns. At the other end there were more steps, wide and curving, leading up to a dais on which, in a throne-like marble chair, sat the king of Attalus, sullen as ever. A number of his chiefs sat on stone benches on either side of the dais, and the common people ranged themselves along the wall, leaving a wide space clear before the throne.

In this open space crouched a vulture-like figure. It was Abdullah, his eyes shining with hate and fear, and before him lay the corpse of the man Gordon had killed in the deserted house. The other two kidnapers stood near by, their bruised features sullen and ill at ease.

Gordon was conducted into the open space before the dais, and the guards fell back on either side of him. There was little formality. Ptolemy motioned to Abdullah and said: “Make your charge.”

Abdullah sprang up and pointed a skinny finger in Gordon’s face.

“I accuse this man of murder!” he screeched. “This morning before dawn he attacked me and my friends while we slept, and slew him who lies there. The rest of us barely escaped with our lives!”

A mutter of surprize and anger rose from the throng. Ptolemy turned his somber stare on Gordon.

“What have you to say?”

“He lies,” answered the American impatiently. “I killed that man, yes —”

He was interrupted by a fierce cry from the people, who began to surge menacingly forward, to be thrust back by the guards.

“I only defended my life,” said Gordon angrily, not relishing his position of defendant. “That Tajik dog and three others, that dead man and those two standing there, slipped in my chamber last night as I slept in the house of Perdiccas, knocked me senseless and carried me away to rob and kill me.”

“Aye!” cried Bardylis wrathfully. “And they slew one of my father’s servants while he slept.”

At that the murmur of the mob changed, and they halted in uncertainty.

“A lie!” screamed Abdullah, fired to recklessness by avarice and hate. “Bardylis is bewitched! El Borak is a wizard! How else could he speak your tongue?”

The crowd recoiled abruptly, and some made furtive signs to avert conjury. The Attalans were as superstitious as their ancestors. Bardylis had drawn his sword, and his friends rallied about him, clean-cut, rangy youngsters, quivering like hunting dogs in their eagerness.

“Wizard or man!” roared Bardylis, “he is my brother, and no man touches him save at peril of his head!”

“He is a wizard!” screamed Abdullah, foam dabbling his beard. “I know him of old! Beware of him! He will bring madness and ruin upon Attalus! On his body he bears a scroll with magic inscriptions, wherein lies his necromantic power! Give that scroll to me, and I will take it afar from Attalus and destroy it where it can do no harm. Let me prove I do not lie! Hold him while I search him, and I will show you.”

“Let no man dare touch El Borak!” challenged Bardylis. Then from his throne rose Ptolemy, a great menacing image of bronze, somber and awe-inspiring. He strode down the steps, and men shrank back

from his bleak eyes. Bardylis stood his ground, as if ready to defy even his terrible king, but Gordon drew the lad aside. El Borak was not one to stand quietly by while someone else defended him.

"It is true," he said without heat, "that I have a packet of papers in my garments. But it is also true that it has nothing to do with witchcraft, and that I will kill the man who tries to take it from me."

At that Ptolemy's brooding impassiveness vanished in a flame of passion.

"Will you defy even me?" he roared, his eyes blazing, his great hands working convulsively. "Do you deem yourself already king of Attalus? You black-haired dog, I will kill you with my naked hands! Back, and give us space!"

His sweeping arms hurled men right and left, and roaring like a bull, he hurled himself on Gordon. So swift and violent was his attack that Gordon was unable to avoid it. They met breast to breast, and the smaller man was hurled backward, and to his knee. Ptolemy plunged over him, unable to check his velocity, and then, locked in a death-grapple they ripped and tore, while the people surged yelling about them.

Not often did El Borak find himself opposed by a man stronger than himself. But the king of Attalus was a mass of whale-bone and iron, and nerved to blinding quickness. Neither had a weapon. It was man to man, fighting as the primitive progenitors of the race fought. There was no science about Ptolemy's onslaught; he fought like a tiger or a lion, with all the appalling frenzy of the primordial. Again and again Gordon battered his way out of a grapple that threatened to snap his spine like a rotten branch. His blinding blows ripped and smashed in a riot of destruction. The tall king of Attalus swayed and trembled before them like a tree in a storm, but always came surging back like a typhoon, lashing out with great strokes that drove Gordon staggering before him, rending and tearing with mighty fingers.

Only his desperate speed and the savage skill of boxing and wrestling that was his had saved Gordon so long. Naked to the

waist, battered and bruised, his tortured body quivered with the punishment he was enduring. But Ptolemy's great chest was heaving; his face was a mask of raw beef, and his torso showed the effects of a beating that would have killed a lesser man.

Gasping a cry that was half curse, half sob, he threw himself bodily on the American, bearing him down by sheer weight. As they fell he drove a knee savagely at Gordon's groin, and tried to fall with his full weight on the smaller man's breast. A twist of his body sent the knee sliding harmlessly along his thigh, and Gordon writhed from under the heavier body as they fell.

The impact broke their holds, and they staggered up simultaneously. Through the blood and sweat that streamed into his eyes, Gordon saw the king towering above him, reeling, arms spread, blood pouring down his mighty breast. His belly went in as he drew a great laboring breath. And into the relaxed pit of his stomach Gordon, crouching, drove his left with all the strength of ridged arm, iron shoulders and knotted calves behind it. His clenched fist sank to the wrist in Ptolemy's solar plexus. The king's breath went out of him in an explosive grunt; his hands dropped, he

swayed like a tall tree under the axe. Gordon's right, hooking up in a terrible arc, met his jaw with a sound like a cooper's mallet, and Ptolemy pitched headlong and lay still.

V

In the stupified silence that followed the fall of the king, while all eyes, dilated with surprize, were fixed on the prostrate giant and the groggy figure that weaved above him, a gasping voice shouted from outside the palace. It grew louder, mingled with a clatter of hoofs which stopped at the outer steps. All wheeled toward the door as a wild figure staggered in, spattering blood.

"A guard from the pass!" cried Bardylis.

"The Moslems!" cried the man, blood spurting through his fingers which he pressed to his shoulder. "Three hundred Afghans! They have stormed the pass! They are led by a *Feringhi* and four *Turki* who have rifles that fire many times without reloading! These men shot us down from afar off as we strove to defend the pass. The Afghans have entered the valley —" He swayed and fell, blood trickling from his lips. A blue bullet hole showed in his shoulder, near the base of his neck.

No clamor of terror greeted this appalling news. In the utter silence that followed, all eyes turned toward Gordon, leaning dizzily against the wall, gasping for breath.

"You have conquered Ptolemy," said Bardylis. "He is dead or senseless. While he is helpless, you are king. That is the law. Tell us what to do."

Gordon gathered his dazed wits and accepted the situation without demur or question. If the Afghans were in the valley, there was no time to waste. He thought he could hear the distant popping of firearms already.

"How many men are able to bear arms?" he panted.

"Three hundred and fifty," answered one of the chiefs.

“Then let them take their weapons and follow me,” he said. “The walls of the city are rotten. If we try to defend them, with Hunyadi directing the siege, we will be trapped like rats. We must win with one stroke, if at all.”

Someone brought him a sheathed and belted scimitar and he buckled it about his waist. His head was still swimming and his body numb, but from some obscure reservoir he drew a fund of reserve power, and the prospect of a final showdown with Hunyadi fired his blood. At his directions men lifted Ptolemy and placed him on a couch. The king had not moved since he dropped, and Gordon thought it probable that he had a concussion of the brain. That pole-ax smash that had felled him would have split the skull of a lesser man.

Then Gordon remembered Abdullah, and looked about for him, but the Tajik had vanished.

At the head of the warriors of Attalus, Gordon strode down the street and through the ponderous gate. All were armed with long curved swords; some had unwieldy matchlocks, ancient weapons captured from the hill tribes. He knew the Afghans would be no better armed, but the rifles of Hunyadi and his Turks would count heavily.

He could see the horde swarming up the valley, still some distance away. They were on foot. Lucky for the Attalans that one of the pass-guards had kept a horse near him. Otherwise the Afghans would have been at the very walls of the town before the word came of their invasion.

The invaders were drunk with exultation, halting to fire outlying huts and growing stuff, and to shoot cattle, in sheer wanton destructiveness. Behind Gordon rose a deep rumble of rage, and looking back at the blazing blue eyes, and tall, tense figures, the American knew he was leading no weaklings to battle.

He led them to a long straggling heap of stones which ran waveringly clear across the valley, marking an ancient fortification, long abandoned and crumbling down. It would afford some cover.

When they reached it the invaders were still out of rifle fire. The Afghans had ceased their plundering and came on at an increased gait, howling like wolves.

Gordon ordered his men to lie down behind the stones, and called to him the warriors with the matchlocks — some thirty in all.

“Pay no heed to the Afghans,” he instructed them. “Shoot at the men with the rifles. Do not shoot at random, but wait until I give the word, then all fire together.”

The ragged horde were spreading out somewhat as they approached, loosing their matchlocks before they were in range of the grim band waiting silently along the crumbled wall. The Attalans quivered with eagerness, but Gordon gave no sign. He saw the tall, supple figure of Hunyadi, and the bulkier shapes of his turbaned Turks, in the center of the ragged crescent. The men came straight on, apparently secure in the knowledge that the Attalans had no modern weapons, and that Gordon had lost his rifle. They had seen him climbing down the cliff without it. Gordon cursed Abdullah, whose treachery had lost him his pistol.

Before they were in range of the matchlocks, Hunyadi fired, and the warrior at Gordon’s side slumped over, drilled through the head. A mutter of rage and impatience ran along the line, but Gordon quieted the warriors, ordering them to lie closer behind the rocks. Hunyadi tried again, and the Turks blazed away, but the bullets whined off the stones. The men moved nearer and behind them the Afghans howled with blood-thirsty impatience, rapidly getting out of hand.

Gordon had hoped to lure Hunyadi into reach of his matchlocks. But suddenly, with an earth-shaking yell, the Afghans stormed past the Hungarian in a wave, knives flaming like the sun on water. Hunyadi yelped explosively, unable to see or shoot at his enemies, for the backs of his reckless allies. Despite his curses, they came on with a roar.

Gordon, crouching among the stones, glared at the gaunt giants rushing toward him until he could make out the fanatical blaze of

their eyes, then he roared: *"Fire!"*

A thunderous volley ripped out along the wall, ragged, but terrible at that range. A storm of lead blasted the oncoming line, and men went down in windrows. And lost to all caution, the Attalans leaped the wall and hewed into the staggering Afghans with naked steel. Cursing as Hunyadi had cursed, Gordon drew his scimitar and followed them.

No time for orders now; no formation, no strategy; Attalan and Afghan, they fought as men fought a thousand years ago, without order or plan, massed in a straining, grunting, hacking mob, where naked blades flickered like lightning. Yard-long Khyber knives clanged and ground against the curved swords of the Attalans. The rending of flesh and bone beneath the chopping blades was like the sound of butchers' cleavers. The dying dragged down the living and the warriors stumbled among the mangled corpses. It was a shambles where no quarter was asked and none given, and the feuds and hates of a thousand years glutted in slaughter.

No shots were fired in that deadly crush, but about the edges of the battle circled Hunyadi and the Turks, shooting with deadly accuracy. Man to man, the stalwart Attalans were a match for the hairy hillmen, and they slightly outnumbered the invaders. But they had thrown away the advantage of their position, and the rifles of the Hungarian's party were dealing havoc in their disordered ranks, though two of the Ottomans were down, one hit by a matchlock ball in that first and only volley, and another disembowelled by a dying Attalan.

As Gordon hewed his way through the straining knots and flailing blades, he met one of the remaining Turks face to face. The man thrust a rifle muzzle in his face, but the hammer fell with a click on an empty shell, and the next instant Gordon's scimitar ripped through his belly and stood out a foot behind his back. As the American twisted his blade free, the other Ottoman fired a pistol, missed, and hurled the empty weapon fruitlessly, and rushed in slashing with a saber at Gordon's head. El Borak parried the singing

blade, and his scimitar cut the air like a blue beam, splitting the Turk's skull to the chin.

Then he saw Hunyadi. The Hungarian was groping in his belt, and Gordon knew he was out of ammunition.

"We've tried hot lead, Gustav," challenged Gordon, "and we both still live. Come and try cold steel!"

With a wild laugh the Hungarian ripped out his blade in a bright shimmer of steel that caught the morning sun. He was a tall man, Gustav Hunyadi, black sheep son of a noble Magyar house, supple and lithe as a catamount, with dancing, reckless eyes and lips that curved in a smile as cruel as a striking sword.

"I match my life against a little package of papers, El Borak!" the Hungarian laughed as the blades met.

On each side the fighting lulled and ceased, as the warriors drew back with heaving chests and dripping swords, to watch their leaders settle the score.

The curved blades sparkled in the sunlight, ground together, leaped apart, licked in and out like living things.

Well for El Borak then that his wrist was a solid mass of steel cords, that his eye was quicker and surer than a falcon's, and his brain and thews bound together with a coordination keen as razor-edged steel. For into his play Hunyadi brought all the skill of a race of swordsmen, all the craft taught by masters of the blade of Europe and of Asia, and all the savage cunning he had learned in wild battles on the edges of the world.

He was taller, had the longer reach. Again and again his blade whispered at Gordon's throat. Once it touched his arm, and a trickle of crimson began. There was no sound except the rasp of feet on the sward, the rapid whisper of the blades, the deep panting of the men. Gordon was the harder pressed. That terrible fight with Ptolemy was taking its toll. His legs trembled, his sight kept blurring. As if through a mist he saw the triumphant smile growing on the thin lips of the Magyar.

And a wild surge of desperation rose in Gordon's soul, nerving him for a last rush. It came with the unexpected fury of a dying wolf, with a flaming fan of steel, a whirlwind of blades — and then Hunyadi was down, clutching at the earth with twitching hands, Gordon's narrow curved blade through him.

The Hungarian rolled his glazing eyes up at his conqueror, and his lips distorted in a ghastly smile. "To the mistress of all true adventurers!" he whispered, choking on his own blood. "To Lady Death!"

He sank back and lay still, his pallid face turned to the sky, blood oozing from his lips.

The Afghans began slinking furtively away, their morale broken, like a pack of wolves whose leader is down. Suddenly, as if waking from a dream, the Attalans gave tongue and pelted after them. The invaders broke and fled, while the infuriated Attalans followed, stabbing and hacking at their backs, down the valley and out through the pass.

Gordon was aware that Bardylis, blood-stained but exultant, was beside him, supporting his trembling frame that seemed on the point of collapse. The American wiped the bloody sweat from his eyes, and touched the packet under his girdle. Many men had died for that; but many more would have died had it not been saved, and helpless women and children.

Bardylis muttered apprehensively, and Gordon looked up to see a gigantic figure approaching leisurely from the direction of the city, through whose gate the rejoicing women were already streaming. It was Ptolemy, his features grotesquely swollen and blackened from Gordon's iron fists. He strode serenely through the heaps of corpses, and reached the spot where the companions stood.

Bardylis gripped his notched sword, and Ptolemy, seeing the gesture, grinned with his pulped lips. He was holding something behind him.

"I do not come in anger, El Borak," he said calmly. "A man who can fight as you have fought is neither wizard, thief nor murderer. I

am no child to hate a man who has bested me in fair fight — and then saved my kingdom while I lay senseless. Will you take my hand?"

Gordon grasped it with an honest surge of friendship toward this giant, whose only fault, after all, was his vanity.

"I did not recover my senses in time for the battle," said Ptolemy. "I only saw the last of it. But if I did not reach the field in time to smite the Moslem dogs, I have at least rid the valley of one rat I found hiding in the palace." He casually tossed something at Gordon's feet. The severed head of Abdullah, the features frozen in a grin of horror, stared up at the American.

"Will you live in Attalus and be my brother, as well as the brother of Bardylis?" asked Ptolemy, with a glance down the valley, toward the pass through which the warriors were harrying the howling Afghans.

"I thank you, king," said Gordon, "but I must go to my own people, and it is still a long road to travel. When I have rested for a few days, I must be gone. A little food to carry with me on my journey is all I ask from the people of Attalus, who are men as brave and valiant as their royal ancestors."

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The Daughter of Erlik Khan

I

The tall Englishman, Pembroke, was scratching lines on the earth with his hunting knife, talking in a jerky tone that indicated suppressed excitement: “I tell you, Ormond, that peak to the west is the one we were to look for. Here, I’ve marked a map in the dirt. This mark here represents our camp, and this one is the peak. We’ve marched north far enough. At this spot we should turn westward —”

“Shut up!” muttered Ormond. “Rub out that map. Here comes Gordon.” Pembroke obliterated the faint lines with a quick sweep of his open hand, and as he scrambled up he managed to shuffle his feet across the spot. He and Ormond were laughing and talking easily as the third man of the expedition came up.

Gordon was shorter than his companions, but his physique did not suffer by comparison with either the rangy Pembroke or the more closely knit Ormond. He was one of those rare individuals at once lithe and compact. His strength did not give the impression of being

locked up within himself as is the case with so many strong men. He moved with a flowing ease that advertised power more subtly than does mere beefy bulk.

Though he was clad much like the two Englishmen except for an Arab headdress, he fitted into the scene as they did not. He, an American, seemed almost as much a part of these rugged uplands as the wild nomads which pasture their sheep along the slopes of the Hindu Kush. There was a certitude in his level gaze, an economy of motion in his movements, that reflected kinship with the wilderness.

“Pembroke and I were discussing that peak, Gordon,” said Ormond, indicating the mountain under discussion, which reared a snow cap in the clear afternoon sky beyond a range of blue hills, hazy with distance. “We were wondering if it had a name.”

“Everything in these hills has a name,” Gordon answered. “Some of them don’t appear on the maps, though. That peak is called Mount Erlik Khan. Less than a dozen white men have seen it.”

“Never heard of it,” was Pembroke’s comment. “If we weren’t in such a hurry to find poor old Reynolds, it might be fun having a closer look at it, what?”

“If getting your belly ripped open can be called fun,” returned Gordon. “Erlik Khan’s in Black Kirghiz country.”

“Kirghiz? Heathens and devil worshipers? Sacred city of Yolgan and all that rot.”

“No rot about the devil worship,” Gordon returned. “We’re almost on the borders of their country now. This is a sort of no man’s land here, squabbled over by the Kirghiz and Moslem nomads from farther east. We’ve been lucky not to have met any of the former. They’re an isolated branch off the main stalk which centers about Issik-kul, and they hate white men like poison.

“This is the closest point we approach their country. From now on, as we travel north, we’ll be swinging away from it. In another week, at most, we ought to be in the territory of the Uzbek tribe who you think captured your friend.”

“I hope the old boy is still alive,” Pembroke sighed.

“When you engaged me at Peshawar I told you I feared it was a futile quest,” said Gordon. “If that tribe did capture your friend, the chances are all against his being still alive. I’m just warning you, so you won’t be too disappointed if we don’t find him.”

“We appreciate that, old man,” returned Ormond. “We knew no one but you could get us there with our heads still on our bally shoulders.”

“We’re not there yet,” remarked Gordon cryptically, shifting his rifle under his arm. “I saw hangul sign before we went into camp, and I’m going to see if I can bag one. I may not be back before dark.”

“Going afoot?” inquired Pembroke.

“Yes; if I get one I’ll bring back a haunch for supper.”

And with no further comment Gordon strode off down the rolling slope, while the other men stared silently after him.

He seemed to melt rather than stride into the broad copse at the foot of the slope. The men turned, still unspeaking, and glanced at the servants going about their duties in the camp — four stolid Pathans and a slender Punjabi Moslem who was Gordon’s personal servant.

The camp with its faded tents and tethered horses was the one spot of sentient life in a scene so vast and broodingly silent that it was almost daunting. To the south stretched an unbroken rampart of hills climbing up to snowy peaks. Far to the north rose another more broken range.

Between those barriers lay a great expanse of rolling table-land, broken by solitary peaks and lesser hill ranges, and dotted thickly with copses of ash, birch, and larch. Now, in the beginning of the short summer, the slopes were covered with tall lush grass. But here no herds were watched by turbaned nomads, and that giant peak far

to the southwest seemed somehow aware of that fact. It brooded like a somber sentinel of the unknown.

“Come into my tent!”

Pembroke turned away quickly, motioning Ormond to follow. Neither of them noticed the burning intensity with which the Punjabi Ahmed stared after them. In the tent, the men sitting facing each other across a small folding table, Pembroke took pencil and paper and began tracing a duplicate of the map he had scratched in the dirt.

“‘Reynolds’ has served his purpose, and so has Gordon,” he said. “It was a big risk bringing him, but he was the only man who could get us safely through Afghanistan. The weight that American carries with the Mohammedans is amazing. But it doesn’t carry with the Kirghiz, and beyond this point we don’t need him.

“That’s the peak the Tajik described, right enough, and he gave it the same name Gordon called it. Using it as a guide, we can’t miss Yolgan. We head due west, bearing a little to the north of Mount Erlik Khan. We don’t need Gordon’s guidance from now on, and we won’t need him going back, because we’re returning by the way of Kashmir, and we’ll have a better safe-conduct even than he. Question now is, how are we going to get rid of him?”

“That’s easy,” snapped Ormond; he was the harder-framed, the more decisive, of the two. “We’ll simply pick a quarrel with him and refuse to continue in his company. He’ll tell us to go to the devil, take his confounded Punjabi, and head back for Kabul — or maybe some other wilderness. He spends most of his time wandering around through countries that are taboo to most white men.”

“Good enough!” approved Pembroke. “We don’t want to fight him. He’s too infernally quick with a gun. The Afghans call him ‘El Borak,’ the Swift. I had something of the sort in mind when I cooked up an excuse to halt here in the middle of the afternoon. I recognized that peak, you see. We’ll let him think we’re going on to the Uzbeks alone, because, naturally, we don’t want him to know we’re going to Yolgan —”

“What’s that?” snapped Ormond suddenly, his hand closing on his pistol butt.

In that instant, when his eyes narrowed and his nostrils expanded, he looked almost like another man, as if suspicion disclosed his true — and sinister — nature.

“Go on talking,” he muttered. “Somebody’s listening outside the tent.”

Pembroke obeyed, and Ormond, noiselessly pushing back his camp chair, plunged suddenly out of the tent and fell on someone with a snarl of gratification. An instant later he reentered, dragging the Punjabi, Ahmed, with him. The slender Indian writhed vainly in the Englishman’s iron grip.

“This rat was eavesdropping,” Ormond snarled.

“Now he’ll spill everything to Gordon and there’ll be a fight, sure!” The prospect seemed to agitate Pembroke considerably. “What’ll we do now? What are you going to do?”

Ormond laughed savagely. “I haven’t come this far to risk getting a bullet in my guts and losing everything. I’ve killed men for less than this.”

Pembroke cried out an involuntary protest as Ormond’s hand dipped and the blue-gleaming gun came up. Ahmed screamed, and his cry was drowned in the roar of the shot.

“Now we’ll *have* to kill Gordon!”

Pembroke wiped his brow with a hand that shook a trifle. Outside rose a sudden mutter of Pashto as the Pathan servants crowded toward the tent.

“He’s played into our hands!” rapped Ormond, shoving the still smoking gun back into his holster. With his booted toe he stirred the motionless body at his feet as casually as if it had been that of a snake. “He’s out on foot, with only a handful of cartridges. It’s just as well this turned out as it did.”

“What do you mean?” Pembroke’s wits seemed momentarily muddled.

“We’ll simply pack up and clear out. Let him try to follow us on foot, if he wants to. There are limits to the abilities of every man. Left in these mountains on foot, without food, blankets, or ammunition, I don’t think any white man will ever see Francis Xavier Gordon alive again.”

II

When Gordon left the camp he did not look behind him. Any thought of treachery on the part of his companions was furthest from his mind. He had no reason to suppose that they were anything except what they had represented themselves to be — white men taking a long chance to find a comrade the unmapped solitudes had swallowed up.

It was an hour or so after leaving the camp when, skirting the end of a grassy ridge, he sighted an antelope moving along the fringe of a thicket. The wind, such as there was, was blowing toward him, away from the animal. He began stalking it through the thicket, when a movement in the bushes behind him brought him around to the realization that he himself was being stalked.

He had a glimpse of a figure behind a clump of scrub, and then a bullet fanned his ear, and he fired at the flash and the puff of smoke. There was a thrashing among the foliage and then stillness. A moment later he was bending over a picturesquely clad form on the ground.

It was a lean, wiry man, young, with an ermine-edged *khilat*, a fur *calpack*, and silver-heeled boots. Sheathed knives were in his girdle, and a modern repeating rifle lay near his hand. He had been shot through the heart.

“Turkoman,” muttered Gordon. “Bandit, from his looks, out on a lone scout. I wonder how far he’s been trailing me.”

He knew the presence of the man implied two things: somewhere in the vicinity there was a band of Turkomans; and somewhere, probably close by, there was a horse. A nomad never walked far, even when stalking a victim. He glanced up at the rise which rolled up from the copse. It was logical to believe that the Moslem had sighted him from the crest of the low ridge, had tied his horse on the other side, and glided down into the thicket to waylay him while he stalked the antelope.

Gordon went up the slope warily, though he did not believe there were any other tribesmen within earshot — else the reports of the rifles would have brought them to the spot — and found the horse without trouble. It was a Turkish stallion with a red leather saddle with wide silver stirrups and a bridle heavy with goldwork. A scimitar hung from the saddle peak in an ornamented leather scabbard.

Swinging into the saddle, Gordon studied all quarters of the compass from the summit of the ridge. In the south a faint ribbon of smoke stood against the evening. His black eyes were keen as a hawk's; not many could have distinguished that filmy blue feather against the cerulean of the sky.

"Turkoman means bandits," he muttered. "Smoke means camp. They're trailing us, sure as fate."

Reining about, he headed for the camp. His hunt had carried him some miles east of the site, but he rode at a pace that ate up the distance. It was not yet twilight when he halted in the fringe of the larches and sat silently scanning the slope on which the camp had stood. It was bare. There was no sign of tents, men, or beasts.

His gaze sifted the surrounding ridges and clumps, but found nothing to rouse his alert suspicion. At last he walked his steed up the acclivity, carrying his rifle at the ready. He saw a smear of blood on the ground where he knew Pembroke's tent had stood, but there was no other sign of violence, and the grass was not trampled as it would have been by a charge of wild horsemen.

He read the evidence of a swift but orderly exodus. His companions had simply struck their tents, loaded the pack animals, and departed. But why? Sight of distant horsemen might have stampeded the white men, though neither had shown any sign of the white feather before; but certainly Ahmed would not have deserted his master and friend.

As he traced the course of the horses through the grass, his puzzlement increased; they had gone westward.

Their avowed destination lay beyond those mountains in the north. They knew that, as well as he. But there was no mistake about it. For some reason, shortly after he had left camp, as he read the signs, they had packed hurriedly and set off westward, toward the forbidden country identified by Mount Erlik.

Thinking that possibly they had a logical reason for shifting camp and had left him a note of some kind which he had failed to find, Gordon rode back to the camp site and began casting about it in an ever-widening circle, studying the ground. And presently he saw sure signs that a heavy body had been dragged through the grass.

Men and horses had almost obliterated the dim track, but for years Gordon's life had depended upon the keenness of his faculties. He remembered the smear of blood on the ground where Pembroke's tent had stood.

He followed the crushed grass down the south slope and into a thicket, and an instant later he was kneeling beside the body of a man. It was Ahmed, and at first glance Gordon thought he was dead. Then he saw that the Punjabi, though shot through the body and undoubtedly dying, still had a faint spark of life in him.

He lifted the turbaned head and set his canteen to the blue lips. Ahmed groaned, and into his glazed eyes came intelligence and recognition.

"Who did this, Ahmed?" Gordon's voice grated with the suppression of his emotions.

"Ormond Sahib," gasped the Punjabi. "I listened outside their tent, because I feared they planned treachery to you. I never trusted

them. So they shot me and have gone away, leaving you to die alone in the hills."

"But why?" Gordon was more mystified than ever.

"They go to Yolgan," panted Ahmed. "The Reynolds Sahib we sought never existed. He was a lie they created to hoodwink you."

"Why to Yolgan?" asked Gordon.

But Ahmed's eyes dilated with the imminence of death; in a racking convulsion he heaved up in Gordon's arms; then blood gushed from his lips and he died.

Gordon rose, mechanically dusting his hands. Immobile as the deserts he haunted, he was not prone to display his emotions. Now he merely went about heaping stones over the body to make a cairn that wolves and jackals could not tear into. Ahmed had been his companion on many a dim road; less servant than friend.

But when he had lifted the last stone, Gordon climbed into the saddle, without a backward glance, and without a backward glance he rode westward. He was alone in a savage country, without food or proper equipage. Chance had given him a horse, and years of wandering on the raw edges of the world had given him experience and a greater familiarity with this unknown land than any other white man he knew. It was conceivable that he might live to win his way through to some civilized outpost.

But he did not even give that possibility a thought. Gordon's ideas of obligation, of debt and payment, were as direct and primitive as those of the barbarians among whom his lot had been cast for so many years. Ahmed had been his friend and had died in his service. Blood must pay for blood.

That was as certain in Gordon's mind as hunger is certain in the mind of a gray timber wolf. He did not know why the killers were going toward forbidden Yolgan, and he did not greatly care. His task

was to follow them to hell if necessary and exact full payment for spilled blood. No other course suggested itself.

Darkness fell and the stars came out, but he did not slacken his pace. Even by starlight it was not hard to follow the trail of the caravan through the high grass. The Turkish horse proved a good one and fairly fresh. He felt certain of overtaking the laden pack ponies, in spite of their long start.

As the hours passed, however, he decided that the Englishmen were determined to push on all night. They evidently meant to put so much distance between them and himself that he could never catch them, following on foot as they thought him to be. But why were they so anxious to keep from him the truth of their destination?

A sudden thought made his face grim, and after that he pushed his mount a bit harder. His hand instinctively sought the hilt of the broad scimitar slung from the high-peaked horn.

His gaze sought the white cap of Mount Erlik, ghostly in the starlight, then swung to the point where he knew Yolgan lay. He had been there before, himself, had heard the deep roar of the long bronze trumpets that shaven-headed priests blow from the mountains at sunrise.

It was past midnight when he sighted fires near the willow-massed banks of a stream. At first glance he knew it was not the camp of the men he followed. The fires were too many. It was an *ordu* of the nomadic Kirghiz who roam the country between Mount Erlik Khan and the loose boundaries of the Mohammedan tribes. This camp lay full in the path of Yolgan and he wondered if the Englishmen had known enough to avoid it. These fierce people hated strangers. He himself, when he visited Yolgan, had accomplished the feat disguised as a native.

Gaining the stream above the camp he moved closer, in the shelter of the willows, until he could make out the dim shapes of sentries on horseback in the light of the small fires. And he saw something else — three white European tents inside the ring of

round, gray felt *kibitkas*. He swore silently; if the Black Kirghiz had killed the white men, appropriating their belongings, it meant the end of his vengeance. He moved nearer.

It was a suspicious, slinking, wolf-like dog that betrayed him. Its frenzied clamor brought men swarming out of the felt tents, and a swarm of mounted sentinels raced toward the spot, stringing bows as they came.

Gordon had no wish to be filled with arrows as he ran. He spurred out of the willows and was among the horsemen before they were aware of him, slashing silently right and left with the Turkish scimitar. Blades swung around him, but the men were more confused than he. He felt his edge grate against steel and glance down to split a broad skull; then he was through the cordon and racing into deeper darkness while the demoralized pack howled behind him.

A familiar voice shouting above the clamor told him that Ormond, at least, was not dead. He glanced back to see a tall figure cross the firelight and recognized Pembroke's rangy frame. The fire gleamed on steel in his hands. That they were armed showed they were not prisoners, though this forbearance on the part of the fierce nomads was more than his store of Eastern lore could explain.

The pursuers did not follow him far; drawing in under the shadows of a thicket he heard them shouting gutturally to each other as they rode back to the tent. There would be no more sleep in that *ordu* that night. Men with naked steel in their hands would pace their horses about the encampment until dawn. It would be difficult to steal back for a long shot at his enemies. But now, before he slew them, he wished to learn what took them to Yolgan.

Absently his hand caressed the hawk-headed pommel of the Turkoman scimitar. Then he turned again eastward and rode back along the route he had come, as fast as he could push the wearying horse. It was not yet dawn when he came upon what he had hoped to find — a second camp, some ten miles west of the spot where Ahmed had been killed; dying fires reflected on one small tent and on the forms of men wrapped in cloaks on the ground.

He did not approach too near; when he could make out the lines of slowly moving shapes that were picketed horses and could see other shapes that were riders pacing about the camp, he drew back behind a thicketed ridge, dismounted and unsaddled his horse.

While it eagerly cropped the fresh grass, he sat cross-legged with his back to a tree trunk, his rifle across his knees, as motionless as an image and as imbued with the vast patience of the East as the eternal hills themselves.

III

Dawn was little more than a hint of grayness in the sky when the camp that Gordon watched was astir. Smoldering coals leaped up into flames again, and the scent of mutton stew filled the air. Wiry

men in caps of Astrakhan fur and girdled *caftans* swaggered among the horse lines or squatted beside the cooking pots, questing after savory morsels with unwashed fingers. There were no women among them and scant luggage. The lightness with which they traveled could mean only one thing.

The sun was not yet up when they began saddling horses and belting on weapons. Gordon chose that moment to appear, riding leisurely down the ridge toward them.

A yell went up, and instantly a score of rifles covered him. The very boldness of his action stayed their fingers on the triggers. Gordon wasted no time, though he did not appear hurried. Their chief had already mounted, and Gordon reined up almost beside him. The Turkoman glared — a hawk-nosed, evil-eyed ruffian with a henna-stained beard. Recognition grew like a red flame in his eyes, and, seeing this, his warriors made no move.

"Yusef Khan," said Gordon, "you Sunnite dog, have I found you at last?"

Yusef Khan plucked his red beard and snarled like a wolf. "Are you mad, El Borak?"

"It is El Borak!" rose an excited murmur from the warriors, and that gained Gordon another respite.

They crowded closer, their blood lust for the instant conquered by their curiosity. El Borak was a name known from Istanbul to Bhutan and repeated in a hundred wild tales wherever the wolves of the desert gathered.

As for Yusef Khan, he was puzzled, and furtively eyed the slope down which Gordon had ridden. He feared the white man's cunning almost as much as he hated him, and in his suspicion, hate and fear that he was in a trap, the Turkoman was as dangerous and uncertain as a wounded cobra.

"What do you here?" he demanded. "Speak quickly, before my warriors strip the skin from you a little at a time."

“I came following an old feud.” Gordon had come down the ridge with no set plan, but he was not surprised to find a personal enemy leading the Turkomans. It was no unusual coincidence. Gordon had blood-foes scattered all over Central Asia.

“You are a fool —”

In the midst of the chief’s sentence Gordon leaned from his saddle and struck Yusef Khan across the face with his open hand. The blow cracked like a bull whip and Yusef reeled, almost losing his seat. He howled like a wolf and clawed at his girdle, so muddled with fury that he hesitated between knife and pistol. Gordon could have shot him down while he fumbled, but that was not the American’s plan.

“Keep off!” he warned the warriors, yet not reaching for a weapon. “I have no quarrel with you. This concerns only your chief and me.”

With another man that would have had no effect; but another man would have been dead already. Even the wildest tribesman had a vague feeling that the rules governing action against ordinary Feringhi did not apply to El Borak.

“Take him!” howled Yusef Khan. “He shall be flayed alive!”

They moved forward at that, and Gordon laughed unpleasantly.

“Torture will not wipe out the shame I have put upon your chief,” he taunted. “Men will say ye are led by a khan who bears the mark of El Borak’s hand in his beard. How is such shame to be wiped out? Lo, he calls on his warriors to avenge him! Is Yusef Khan a coward?”

They hesitated again and looked at their chief whose beard was clotted with foam. They all knew that to wipe out such an insult the aggressor must be slain by the victim in single combat. In that wolf pack even a suspicion of cowardice was tantamount to a death sentence.

If Yusef Khan failed to accept Gordon’s challenge, his men might obey him and torture the American to death at his pleasure, but they would not forget, and from that moment he was doomed.

Yusef Khan knew this; knew that Gordon had tricked him into a personal duel, but he was too drunk with fury to care. His eyes were red as those of a rabid wolf, and he had forgotten his suspicions that Gordon had riflemen hidden up on the ridge. He had forgotten everything except his frenzied passion to wipe out forever the glitter in those savage black eyes that mocked him.

“Dog!” he screamed, ripping out his broad scimitar. “Die at the hands of a chief!”

He came like a typhoon, his cloak whipping out in the wind behind him, his scimitar flaming above his head. Gordon met him in the center of the space the warriors left suddenly clear.

Yusef Khan rode a magnificent horse as if it were part of him, and it was fresh. But Gordon’s mount had rested, and it was well-trained in the game of war. Both horses responded instantly to the will of their riders.

The fighters revolved about each other in swift curvets and gambados, their blades flashing and grating without the slightest pause, turned red by the rising sun. It was less like two men fighting on horseback than like a pair of centaurs, half man and half beast, striking for one another’s life.

“Dog!” panted Yusef Khan, hacking and hewing like a man possessed of devils. “I’ll nail your head to my tent pole — ahhhh!”

Not a dozen of the hundred men watching saw the stroke, except as a dazzling flash of steel before their eyes, but all heard its crunching impact. Yusef Khan’s charger screamed and reared, throwing a dead man from the saddle with a split skull.

A wordless wolfish yell that was neither anger nor applause went up, and Gordon wheeled, whirling his scimitar about his head so that the red drops flew in a shower.

“Yusef Khan is dead!” he roared. “Is there one to take up his quarrel?”

They gaped at him, not sure of his intention, and before they could recover from the surprise of seeing their invincible chief fall, Gordon thrust his scimitar back in its sheath with a certain air of finality and said:

“And now who will follow me to plunder greater than any of ye ever dreamed?”

That struck an instant spark, but their eagerness was qualified by suspicion.

“Show us!” demanded one. “Show us the plunder before we slay thee.”

Without answering, Gordon swung off his horse and cast the reins to a mustached rider to hold, who was so astonished that he accepted the indignity without protest. Gordon strove over to a cooking pot, squatted beside it and began to eat ravenously. He had not tasted food in many hours.

“Shall I show you the stars by daylight?” he demanded, scooping out handfuls of stewed mutton. “Yet the stars are there, and men see them in the proper time. If I had the loot would I come asking you to share it? Neither of us can win it without the other’s aid.”

“He lies,” said one whom his comrades addressed as Uzun Beg. “Let us slay him and continue to follow the caravan we have been tracking.”

“Who will lead you?” asked Gordon pointedly.

They scowled at him, and various ruffians who considered themselves logical candidates glanced furtively at one another. Then all looked back at Gordon, unconcernedly wolfing down mutton stew five minutes after having slain the most dangerous swordsman of the black tents.

His attitude of indifference deceived nobody. They knew he was dangerous as a cobra that could strike like lightning in any direction. They knew they could not kill him so quickly that he would not kill some of them and naturally none wanted to be first to die.

That alone would not have stopped them. But that was combined with curiosity, avarice roused by his mention of plunder, vague suspicion that he would not have put himself in a trap unless he held some sort of a winning hand, and jealousy of the leaders of each other.

Uzun Beg, who had been examining Gordon's mount, exclaimed angrily: "He rides Ali Khan's steed!"

"Aye," Gordon assented tranquilly. "Moreover this is Ali Khan's sword. He fired at me from ambush, so he lies dead."

There was no answer. There was no feeling in that wolf pack except fear and hate, and respect for courage, craft, and ferocity.

"Where would you lead us?" demanded one named Orkhan Shah, tacitly recognizing Gordon's dominance. "We be all free men and sons of the sword."

"Ye be all sons of dogs," answered Gordon. "Men without grazing lands or wives, outcasts, denied by thine own people — outlaws whose lives are forfeit, and who must roam in the naked mountains. You followed that dead dog without question. Now ye demand this and that of me!"

Then ensued a medley of argument among themselves, in which Gordon seemed to take no interest. All his attention was devoted to the cooking pot. His attitude was no pose; without swagger or conceit the man was so sure of himself that his bearing was no more self-conscious among a hundred cutthroats hovering on the hair line of murder than it would have been among friends.

Many eyes sought the gun butt at his hip. Men said his skill with the weapon was sorcery; an ordinary revolver became in his hand a living engine of destruction that was drawn and roaring death before a man could realize that Gordon's hand had moved.

"Men say thou hast never broken thy word," suggested Orkhan. "Swear to lead us to this plunder, and it may be we shall see."

"I swear no oaths," answered Gordon, rising and wiping his hands on a saddle cloth. "I have spoken. It is enough. Follow me, and many of you will die. Aye, the jackals will feed full. You will go up

to the paradise of the prophet and your brothers will forget your names. But to those that live, wealth like the rain of Allah will fall upon them."

"Enough of words!" exclaimed one greedily. "Lead us to this rare loot."

"You dare not follow where I would lead," he answered. "It lies in the land of the Kara Kirghiz."

"We dare, by Allah!" they barked angrily. "We are already in the land of the Black Kirghiz, and we follow the caravan of some infidels, whom, *inshallah*, we shall send to hell before another sunrise."

"Bismillah," said Gordon. "Many of you shall eat arrows and edged steel before our quest is over. But if you dare stake your lives against plunder richer than the treasures of Hind, come with me. We have far to ride."

A few minutes later the whole band was trotting westward. Gordon led, with lean riders on either hand; their attitude suggested that he was more prisoner than guide, but he was not perturbed. His confidence in his destiny had again been justified, and the fact that he had not the slightest idea of how to redeem his pledge concerning treasure disturbed him not at all. A way would be opened to him, somehow, and at present he did not even bother to consider it.

IV

The fact that Gordon knew the country better than the Turkomans did aided him in his subtle policy to gain ascendency over them. From giving suggestions to giving orders and being obeyed is a short step, when delicately taken.

He took care that they kept below the sky lines as much as possible. It was not easy to hide the progress of a hundred men from the alert nomads; but these roamed far and there was a chance that only the band he had seen were between him and Yolgan.

But Gordon doubted this when they crossed a track that had been made since he rode eastward the night before. Many riders had passed that point, and Gordon urged greater speed, knowing that if they were spied by the Kirghiz instant pursuit was inevitable.

In the late afternoon they came in sight of the *ordu* beside the willow-lined stream. Horses tended by youngsters grazed near the camp, and farther away the riders watched the sheep which browsed through the tall grass.

Gordon had left all his men except half a dozen in a thicket-massed hollow behind the next ridge, and he now lay among a cluster of boulders on a slope overlooking the valley. The encampment was beneath him, distinct in every detail, and he frowned. There was no sign of the white tents. The Englishmen had been there. They were not there now. Had their hosts turned on them at last, or had they continued alone toward Yolgan?

The Turkomans, who did not doubt that they were to attack and loot their hereditary enemies, began to grow impatient.

"Their fighting men are less than ours," suggested Uzun Beg, "and they are scattered, suspecting nothing. It is long since an enemy invaded the land of the Black Kirghiz. Send back for the others, and let us attack. You promised us plunder."

"Flat-faced women and fat-tailed sheep?" Gordon jeered.

"Some of the women are fair to look at," the Turkoman maintained. "And we could feast full on the sheep. But these dogs carry gold in their wagons to trade to merchants from Kashmir. It comes from Mount Erlik Khan."

Gordon remembered that he had heard tales of a gold mine in Mount Erlik before, and he had seen some crudely cast ingots the owners of which swore they had them from the Black Kirghiz. But gold did not interest him just then.

"That is a child's tale," he said, at least half believing what he said. "The plunder I will lead you to is real; would you throw it away for a dream? Go back to the others and bid them stay hidden. Presently I will return."

They were instantly suspicious, and he saw it.

“Return thou, Uzun Beg,” he said, “and give the others my message. The rest of you come with me.”

That quieted the hair-trigger suspicions of the five, but Uzun Beg grumbled in his beard as he strode back down the slope, mounted and rode eastward. Gordon and his companions likewise mounted behind the crest and, keeping below the sky line, they followed the ridge around as it slanted toward the southwest.

It ended in sheer cliffs, as if it had been sliced off with a knife, but dense thickets hid them from the sight of the camp as they crossed the space that lay between the cliffs and the next ridge, which ran to a bend in the stream, a mile below the *ordu*.

This ridge was considerably higher than the one they had left and before they reached the point where it began to slope downward toward the river, Gordon crawled to the crest and scanned the camp again with a pair of binoculars that had once been the property of Yusef Khan.

The nomads showed no sign that they suspected the presence of enemies, and Gordon turned his glasses farther eastward, located the ridge beyond which his men were concealed, but saw no sign of them. But he did see something else.

Miles to the east a knife-edge ridge cut the sky, notched with a shallow pass. As he looked he saw a string of black dots moving through that notch. It was so far away that even the powerful glasses did not identify them, but he knew what the dots were — mounted men, many of them.

Hurrying back to his five Turkomans, he said nothing, but pressed on, and presently they emerged from behind the ridge and came upon the stream where it wound out of sight of the encampment. Here was the logical crossing for any road leading to Yolgan, and it was not long before he found what he sought.

In the mud at the edges of the stream were the prints of shod hoofs and at one spot the mark of a European boot. The Englishmen

had crossed here; beyond the ford their trail lay west, across the rolling table-land.

Gordon was puzzled anew. He had supposed that there was some particular reason why this clan had received the Englishmen in peace. He had reasoned that Ormond would persuade them to escort him to Yolgan. Though the clans made common cause against invaders, there were feuds among themselves, and the fact that one tribe received a man in peace did not mean that another tribe would not cut his throat.

Gordon had never heard of the nomads of this region showing friendship to any white man. Yet the Englishmen had passed the night in that *ordu* and now plunged boldly on as if confident of their reception. It looked like utter madness.

As he meditated, a distant sputter of rifle fire jerked his head up. He splashed across the stream and raced up the slope that hid them from the valley, with the Turkomans at his heels working the levers of their rifles. As he topped the slope he saw the scene below him crystal-etched in the blue evening.

The Turkomans were attacking the Kirghiz camp. They had crept up the ridge overlooking the valley, and then swept down like a whirlwind. The surprise had been almost, but not quite, complete. Outriding shepherds had been shot down and the flocks scattered, but the surviving nomads had made a stand within the ring of their tents and wagons.

Ancient matchlocks, bows, and a few modern rifles answered the fire of the Turkomans. These came on swiftly, shooting from the saddle, only to wheel and swerve out of close range again.

The Kirghiz were protected by their cover, but even so the hail of lead took toll. A few saddles were emptied, but the Turkomans were hard to hit on their prancing horses, as the riders swung their bodies from side to side.

Gordon gave his horse the rein and came galloping across the valley, his scimitar glittering in his hand. With his enemies gone from the camp, there was no reason for attacking the Kirghiz now as he had planned. But the distance was too great for shouted orders to be heard.

The Turkomans saw him coming, sword in hand, and mistook his meaning. They thought he meant to lead a charge, and in their zeal they anticipated him. They were aided by the panic which struck the Kirghiz as they saw Gordon and his five Turkomans sweep down the slope and construed it as an attack in force on their flank.

Instantly they directed all their fire at the newcomers, emptying the clumsy matchlocks long before Gordon was even within good rifle range. And as they did, the Turkomans charged home with a yell that shook the valley, preceded by a withering fire as they blazed away over their horses' ears.

This time no ragged volleys could stop them. In their panic the tribesmen had loosed all their firearms at once, and the charge caught them with matchlocks and muskets empty. A straggling rifle fire met the oncoming raiders and knocked a few out of their saddles, and a flight of arrows accounted for a few more, but then the charge burst on the makeshift barricade and crumpled it. The howling Turkomans rode their horses in among the tents, flailing right and left with scimitars already crimson.

For an instant hell raged in the *ordu*, then the demoralized nomads broke and fled as best they could, being cut down and trampled by the conquerors. Neither women nor children were spared by the blood-mad Turks. Such as could slipped out of the ring and ran wailing for the river. An instant later the riders were after them like wolves.

Yet, winged by the fear of death, a disorderly mob reached the shore first, broke through the willows and plunged screaming over the low bank, trampling each other in the water. Before the Turkomans could rein their horses over the bank, Gordon arrived, with his horse plastered with sweat and snorting foam.

Enraged at the wanton slaughter, Gordon was an incarnation of berserk fury. He caught the first man's bridle and threw his horse back on its haunches with such violence that the beast lost its footing and fell, sprawling, throwing its rider. The next man sought to crowd past, giving tongue like a wolf, and him Gordon smote with the flat of his scimitar. Only the heavy fur cap saved the skull beneath, and the man pitched, senseless, from his saddle. The others yelled and reined back suddenly.

Gordon's wrath was like a dash of ice-cold water in their faces, shocking their blood-mad nerves into stinging sensibility. From among the tents cries still affronted the twilight, with the butcherlike chopping of merciless sword blows, but Gordon gave no heed. He could save no one in the plundered camp, where the howling warriors were ripping the tents to pieces, overturning the wagons and setting the torch in a hundred places.

More and more men with burning eyes and dripping blades were streaming toward the river, halting as they saw El Borak barring their way. There was not a ruffian there who looked half as formidable as Gordon did in that instant. His lips snarled and his eyes were black coals of hell's fire.

There was no play acting about it. His mask of immobility had fallen, revealing the sheer primordial ferocity of the soul beneath. The dazed Turkomans, still dizzy from the glutting of their blood lust, weary from striking great blows, and puzzled by his attitude, shrank back from him.

"Who gave the order to attack?" he yelled, and his voice was like the slash of a saber.

He trembled in the intensity of his passion. He was a blazing flame of fury and death, without control or repression. He was as wild and brute-savage in that moment as the wildest barbarian in that raw land.

"Uzun Beg!" cried a score of voices, and men pointed at the scowling warrior. "He said that you had stolen away to betray us to the Kirghiz, and that we should attack before they had time to come

upon us and surround us. We believed him until we saw you riding over the slope."

With a wordless fierce yell like the scream of a striking panther, Gordon hurled his horse like a typhoon on Uzun Beg, smiting with his scimitar. Uzun Beg catapulted from his saddle with his skull crushed, dead before he actually realized that he was menaced.

El Borak wheeled on the others and they reined back from him, scrambling in terror.

"Dogs! Jackals! Noseless apes! Forgotten of God!" He lashed them with words that burned like scorpions. "Sons of nameless curs! Did I not bid you keep hidden? Is my word wind — a leaf to be blown away by the breath of a dog like Uzun Beg? Now you have lapped

up needless blood, and the whole countryside will be riding us down like jackals. Where is your loot? Where is the gold with which the wagons of the Kirghiz were laden?"

"There was no gold," muttered a tribesman, mopping blood from a sword cut.

They flinched from the savage scorn and anger in Gordon's baying laughter.

"Dogs that nuzzle in the dung heaps of hell! I should leave you to die."

"Slay him!" mouthed a tribesman. "Shall we eat shame of an infidel? Slay him and let us go back whence we came. There is no loot in this naked land."

The proposal was not greeted with enthusiasm. Their rifles were all empty, some even discarded in the fury of sword strokes. They knew the rifle under El Borak's knee was loaded and the pistol at his hip. Nor did any of them care to ride into the teeth of that reddened scimitar that swung like a live thing in his right hand.

Gordon saw their indecision and mocked them. He did not argue or reason as another man might have done. And if he had, they would have killed him. He beat down opposition with curses, abuses, and threats that were convincing because he meant every word he spat at them. They submitted because they were a wolf pack, and he was the grimmest wolf of them all.

Not one man in a thousand could have bearded them as he did and lived. But there was a driving elemental power about him that shook resolution and daunted anger — something of the fury of an unleashed torrent or a roaring wind that hammered down will power by sheer ferocity.

"We will have no more of thee," the boldest voiced the last spark of rebellion. "Go thy ways, and we will go ours."

Gordon barked a bitter laugh. "Thy ways lead to the fires of Jehannum!" he taunted bitterly. "Ye have spilled blood, and blood

will be demanded in payment. Do you dream that those who have escaped will not flee to the nearest tribes and raise the countryside? You will have a thousand riders about your ears before dawn."

"Let us ride eastward," one said nervously. "We will be out of this land of devils before the alarm is raised."

Again Gordon laughed and men shivered. "Fools! You cannot return. With the glasses I have seen a body of horsemen following our trail. Ye are caught in the fangs of the vise. Without me you cannot go onward; if you stand still or go back, none of you will see another sun set."

Panic followed instantly which was more difficult to fight down than rebellion.

"Slay him!" howled one. "He has led us into a trap!"

"Fools!" cried Orkhan Shah, who was one of the five Gordon had led to the ford. "It was not he who tricked you into charging the Kirghiz. *He* would have led us on to the loot he promised. He knows this land and we do not. If ye slay him now, ye slay the only man who may save us!"

That spark caught instantly, and they clamored about Gordon.

"The wisdom of the sahibs is thine! We be dogs who eat dirt! Save us from our folly! Lo, we obey thee! Lead us out of this land of death, and show us the gold whereof thou spokest!"

Gordon sheathed his scimitar and took command without comment. He gave orders and they were obeyed. Once these wild men, in their fear, turned to him, they trusted him implicitly. They knew he was somehow using them ruthlessly in his own plans, but that was nothing more than any one of them would have done had he been able. In that wild land only the ways of the wolf pack prevailed.

As many Kirghiz horses as could be quickly caught were rounded up. On some of them food and articles of clothing from the looted camp were hastily tied. Half a dozen Turkomans had been killed, nearly a dozen wounded. The dead were left where they had fallen.

The most badly wounded were tied to their saddles, and their groans made the night hideous. Darkness had fallen as the desperate band rode over the slope and plunged across the river. The wailing of the Kirghiz women, hidden in the thickets, was like the dirging of lost souls.

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Gordon did not attempt to follow the trail of the Englishmen over the comparatively level table-land. Yolgan was his destination and he believed he would find them there, but there was desperate need to escape the tribesmen who he was certain were following them, and who would be lashed to fiercer determination by what they would find in the camp by the river.

Instead of heading straight across the table-land, Gordon swung into the hills that bordered it on the south and began following them westward. Before midnight one of the wounded men died in his saddle, and some of the others were semidelirious. They hid the body in a crevice and went on. They moved through the darkness of the hills like ghosts; the only sounds were the clink of hoofs on stone and the groans of the wounded.

An hour before dawn they came to a stream which wound between limestone ledges, a broad shallow stream with a solid rock bottom. They waded their horses along it for three miles, then climbed out again on the same side.

Gordon knew that the Kirghiz, smelling out their trail like wolves, would follow them to the bank and expect some such ruse as an effort to hide their tracks. But he hoped that the nomads would be expecting them to cross the stream and plunge into the mountains on the other side and would therefore waste time looking for tracks along the south bank.

He now headed westward in a more direct route. He did not expect to throw the Kirghiz entirely off the scent. He was only playing for time. If they lost his trail, they would search in any

direction first except toward Yolgan, and to Yolgan he must go, since there was now no chance of catching his enemies on the road.

Dawn found them in the hills, a haggard, weary band. Gordon bade them halt and rest and, while they did so, he climbed the highest crag he could find and patiently scanned the surrounding cliffs and ravines with his binoculars, while he chewed tough strips of dried mutton which the tribesmen carried between saddle and saddlecloth to keep warm and soft. He alternated with cat naps of ten or fifteen minutes' duration, storing up concentrated energy as men of the outlands learn to do, and between times watching the ridges for signs of pursuit.

He let the men rest as long as he dared, and the sun was high when he descended the rock and stirred them into wakefulness. Their steel-spring bodies had recovered some of their resilience, and they rose and saddled with alacrity, all except one of the wounded men, who had died in his sleep. They lowered his body into a deep fissure in the rocks and went on, more slowly, for the horses felt the grind more than the men.

All day they threaded their way through wild gorges overhung by gloomy crags. The Turkomans were cowed by the grim desolation and the knowledge that a horde of bloodthirsty barbarians were on their trail. They followed Gordon without question as he led them, turning and twisting, along dizzy heights and down into the abysmal gloom of savage gorges, then up turreted ridges again and around wind-swept shoulders.

He had used every artifice known to him to shake off pursuit and was making for his set goal as fast as possible. He did not fear encountering any clans in these bare hills; they grazed their flocks on the lower levels. But he was not as familiar with the route he was following as his men thought.

He was feeling his way, mostly by the instinct for direction that men who live in the open possess, but he would have been lost a dozen times but for glimpses of Mount Erlik Khan shouldering up above the surrounding hills in the distance.

As they progressed westward he recognized other landmarks, seen from new angles, and just before sunset he glimpsed a broad shallow valley, across the pine-grown slopes of which he saw the walls of Yolgan looming against the crags behind it.

Yolgan was built at the foot of a mountain, overlooking the valley through which a stream wandered among masses of reeds and willows. Timber was unusually dense. Rugged mountains, dominated by Erlik's peak to the south, swept around the valley to the south and west, and in the north it was blocked by a chain of hills. To the east it was open, sloping down from a succession of uneven ridges. Gordon and his men had followed the ranges in their flight, and now they looked down on the valley from the south.

El Borak led the warriors down from the higher crags and hid them on one of the many gorges debouching on the lower slopes, not more than a mile and a half from the city itself. It ended in a cul-de-sac and suggested a trap, but the horses were ready to fall from exhaustion, the men's canteens were empty, and a spring gurgling out of the solid rock decided Gordon.

He found a ravine leading out of the gorge and placed men on guard there, as well as at the gorge mouth. It would serve as an avenue of escape if need be. The men gnawed the scraps of food that remained, and dressed their wounds as best they could. When he told them he was going on a solitary scout they looked at him with lackluster eyes, in the grip of the fatalism that is the heritage of the Turkish races.

They did not mistrust him, but they felt like dead men already. They looked like ghouls, with their dusty, torn garments, clotted with dried blood, and sunken eyes of hunger and weariness. They squatted or lay about, wrapped in their tattered cloaks, unspeaking.

Gordon was more optimistic than they. Perhaps they had not completely eluded the Kirghiz, but he believed it would take some time for even those human bloodhounds to ferret them out, and he did not fear discovery by the inhabitants of Yolgan. He knew they seldom wandered into the hills.

Gordon had neither slept nor eaten as much as his men, but his steely frame was more enduring than theirs, and he was animated by a terrific vitality that would keep his brain clear and his body vibrant long after another man had dropped in his tracks.

It was dark when Gordon strode on foot out of the gorge, the stars hanging over the peaks like points of chilled silver. He did not strike straight across the valley, but kept to the line of marching hills. So it was no great coincidence that he discovered the cave where men were hidden.

It was situated in a rocky shoulder that ran out into the valley, and which he skirted rather than clamber over. Tamarisk grew thickly about it, masking the mouth so effectually that it was only by chance that he glimpsed the reflection of a fire against a smooth inner wall.

Gordon crept through the thickets and peered in. It was a bigger cave than the mouth indicated. A small fire was going, and three men squatted by it, eating and conversing in guttural Pashto. Gordon recognized three of the camp servants of the Englishmen. Farther back in the cave he saw the horses and heaps of camp equipment. The mutter of conversation was unintelligible where he crouched, and even as he wondered where the white men and the fourth servant were, he heard someone approaching.

He drew back farther into the shadows and waited, and presently a tall figure loomed in the starlight. It was the other Pathan, with his arms full of firewood.

As he strode toward the natural ramp which led up to the cave mouth, he passed so close to Gordon's hiding place that the American could have touched him with an extended arm. But he did not extend an arm; he sprang on the man's back like a panther on a buck.

The firewood was knocked in all directions and the two men rolled together down a short grassy slope, but Gordon's fingers were digging into the Pathan's bull throat, strangling his efforts to cry

out, and the struggle made no noise that could have been heard inside the cave above the crackle of the tamarisk chunks.

The Pathan's superior height and weight were futile against the corded sinews and wrestling skill of his opponent. Heaving the man under him, Gordon crouched on his breast and throttled him dizzy before he relaxed his grasp and let life and intelligence flow back into his victim's dazed brain.

The Pathan recognized his captor and his fear was the greater, because he thought he was in the hands of a ghost. His eyes glimmered in the gloom and his teeth shone in the black tangle of his beard.

"Where are the Englishmen?" demanded Gordon softly. "Speak, you dog, before I break your neck!"

"They went at dusk toward the city of devils!" gasped the Pathan.

"Prisoners?"

"Nay; one with a shaven head guided them. They bore their weapons and were not afraid."

"What are they doing here?"

"By Allah, I do not know."

"Tell me all you do know," commanded Gordon. "But speak softly. If your mates hear and come forth, you will suddenly cease to be. Begin where I went forth to shoot the stag. After that, Ormond killed Ahmed. That I know."

"Aye; it was the Englishman. I had naught to do with it. I saw Ahmed lurking outside Pembroke Sahib's tent. Presently Ormond Sahib came forth and dragged him in the tent. A gun spoke, and when we went to look, the Punjabi lay dead on the floor of the tent.

"Then the sahibs bade us strike the tents and load the pack horses, and we did so without question. We went westward in great haste. When the night was not yet half over, we sighted a camp of the pagans, and my brothers and I were much afraid. But the sahibs went forward, and when the accursed ones came forth with arrows on string, Ormond Sahib held up a strange emblem which glowed in

the light of the torches, whereupon the heathens dismounted and bowed to the earth.

“We abode in their camp that night. In the darkness someone came to the camp and there was fighting and a man slain, and Ormond Sahib said it was a spying Turkoman, and that there would be fighting, so at dawn we left the pagans and went westward in haste, across the ford. When we met other heathen, Ormond showed them the talisman, and they did us honor. All day we hastened, driving the beasts hard, and when night fell, we did not halt, for Ormond Sahib was like one mad. So before the night was half gone, we came into this valley, and the sahibs hid us in this cave.

“Here we abode until a pagan passed near the cavern this morning, driving sheep. Then Ormond Sahib called to him and showed him the talisman and made it known that he wished speech with the priest of the city. So the man went, and presently he returned with the priest who could speak Kashmiri. He and the sahibs talked long together, but what they said I know not. But Ormond Sahib killed the man who had gone to fetch the priest, and he and the priest hid the body with stones.

“Then after more talk, the priest went away, and the sahibs abode in the cave all day. But at dusk another man came to them, a man with a shaven head and camel’s hair robes, and they went with him toward the city. They bade us eat and then saddle and pack the animals, and be ready to move with great haste between midnight and dawn. That is all I know, as Allah is my witness.”

Gordon made no reply. He believed the man was telling the truth, and his bewilderment grew. As he meditated on the tangle, he unconsciously relaxed his grip, and the Pathan chose that instant to make his break for freedom. With a convulsive heave he tore himself partly free of Gordon’s grasp, whipped from his garments a knife he had been unable to reach before, and yelled loudly as he stabbed.

Gordon avoided the thrust by a quick twist of his body; the edge slit his shirt and the skin beneath, and stung by its bite and his peril,

he caught the Pathan's bull neck in both hands and put all his strength into a savage wrench. The man's spinal column snapped like a rotten branch, and Gordon flung himself over backward into the thicker shadows as a man bulked black in the mouth of the cavern. The fellow called a cautious query, but Gordon waited for no more. He was already gone like a phantom into the gloom.

The Pathan repeated his call and then, getting no response, summoned his mates in some trepidation. With weapons in their hands they stole down the ramp, and presently one of them stumbled over the body of their companion. They bent over it, muttering affrightedly.

"This is a place of devils," said one. "The devils have slain Akbar."

"Nay," said another. "It is the people of this valley. They mean to slay us one by one." He grasped his rifle and stared fearsomely into the shadows that hemmed them in. "They have bewitched the sahibs and led them away to be slain," he muttered.

"We will be next," said the third. "The sahibs are dead. Let us load the animals and go away quickly. Better die in the hills than wait like sheep for our throats to be cut."

A few minutes later they were hurrying eastward through the pines as fast as they could urge the laden beasts.

Of this Gordon knew nothing. When he left the slope below the cave he did not follow the trend of hills as before, but headed straight through the pines toward the lights of Yolgan. He had not gone far when he struck a road from the east leading toward the city. It wound among the pines, a slightly less dark thread in a bulwark of blackness.

He followed it to within easy sight of the great gate which stood open in the dark and massive walls of the town. Guards leaned carelessly on their matchlocks. Yolgan feared no attack. Why should it? The wildest of the Mohammedan tribes shunned the land of the

devil worshipers. Sounds of barter and dispute were wafted by the night wind through the gate.

Somewhere in Yolgan, Gordon was sure, were the men he was seeking. That they intended returning to the cave he had been assured. But there was a reason why he wished to enter Yolgan, a reason not altogether tied up with vengeance. As he pondered, hidden in the deep shadow, he heard the soft *clop* of hoofs on the dusty road behind him. He slid farther back among the pines; then with a sudden thought he turned and made his way back beyond the first turn, where he crouched in the blackness beside the road.

Presently a train of laden pack mules came along, with men before and behind and at either side. They bore no torches, moving like men who knew their path. Gordon's eyes had so adjusted themselves to the faint starlight of the road that he was able to recognize them as Kirghiz herdsmen in their long cloaks and round caps. They passed so close to him that their body-scent filled his nostrils.

He crouched lower in the blackness, and as the last man moved past him, a steely arm hooked fiercely about the Kirghiz's throat, choking his cry. An iron fist crunched against his jaw and he sagged senseless in Gordon's arms. The others were already out of sight around the bend of the trail, and the scrape of the mules' bulging packs against the branches along the road was enough to drown the slight noises of the struggle.

Gordon dragged his victim in under the black branches and swiftly stripped him, discarding his own boots and *kaffiyeh* and donning the native's garments, with pistol and scimitar buckled on under the long cloak. A few minutes later he was moving along after the receding column, leaning on his staff as with the weariness of long travel. He knew the man behind him would not regain consciousness for hours.

He came up with the tail of the train, but lagged behind as a straggler might. He kept close enough to the caravan to be identified with it, but not so close as to tempt conversation or recognition by

the other members of the train. When they passed through the gate none challenged him. Even in the flare of the torches under the great gloomy arch he looked like a native, with his dark features fitting in with his garments and the lambskin cap.

As he went down the torch-lighted street, passing unnoticed among the people who chattered and argued in the markets and stalls, he might have been one of the many Kirghiz shepherds who wandered about, gaping at the sights of the city which to them represented the last word in the metropolitan.

Yolgan was not like any other city in Asia. Legend said it was built long ago by a cult of devil worshipers who, driven from their distant homeland, had found sanctuary in this unmapped country, where an isolated branch of the Black Kirghiz, wilder than their kinsmen, roamed as masters. The people of the city were a mixed breed, descendants of these original founders and the Kirghiz.

Gordon saw the monks who were the ruling caste in Yolgan striding through the bazaars — tall, shaven-headed men with Mongolian features. He wondered anew as to their exact origin. They were not Tibetans. Their religion was not a depraved Buddhism. It was an unadulterated devil worship. The architecture of their shrines and temples differed from any he had ever encountered anywhere.

But he wasted no time in conjecture, nor in aimless wandering. He went straight to the great stone building squatting against the side of the mountain at the foot of which Yolgan was built. Its great blank curtains of stone seemed almost like part of the mountain itself.

No one hindered him. He mounted a long flight of steps that were at least a hundred feet wide, bending over his staff as with the weariness of a long pilgrimage. Great bronze doors stood open, unguarded, and he kicked off his sandals and came into a huge hall the inner gloom of which was barely lighted by dim brazen lamps in which melted butter was burned.

Shaven-headed monks moved through the shadows like dusky ghosts, but they gave him no heed, thinking him merely a rustic worshiper come to leave some humble offering at the shrine of Erlik, Lord of the Seventh Hell.

At the other end of the hall, view was cut off by a great divided curtain of gilded leather that hung from the lofty roof to the floor. Half a dozen steps that crossed the hall led up to the foot of the curtain, and before it a monk sat cross-legged and motionless as a statue, arms folded and head bent as if in communion with unguessed spirits.

Gordon halted at the foot of the steps, made as if to prostrate himself, then retreated as if in sudden panic. The monk showed no interest. He had seen too many nomads from the outer world overcome by superstitious awe before the curtain that hid the dread effigy of Erlik Khan. The timid Kirghiz might skulk about the temple for hours before working up nerve enough to make his devotions to the deity. None of the priests paid any attention to the man in the caftan of a shepherd who slunk away as if abashed.

As soon as he was confident that he was not being watched, Gordon slipped through a dark doorway some distance from the gilded curtain and groped his way down a broad unlighted hallway until he came to a flight of stairs. Up this he went with both haste and caution and came presently into a long corridor along which winked sparks of light, like fireflies in a tunnel.

He knew these lights were tiny lamps in the small cells that lined the passage, where the monks spent long hours in contemplation of dark mysteries, or pored over forbidden volumes, the very existence of which is not suspected by the outer world. There was a stair at the nearer end of the corridor, and up this he went, without being discovered by the monks in their cells. The pin points of light in the chambers did not serve to illuminate the darkness of the corridor to any extent.

As Gordon approached a crook in the stair he renewed his caution, for he knew there would be a man on guard at the head of the steps. He knew also that he would be likely to be asleep. The man was there — a half-naked giant with the wizened features of a deaf mute. A broad-tipped tulwar lay across his knees and his head rested on it as he slept.

Gordon stole noiselessly past him and came into an upper corridor which was dimly lighted by brass lamps hung at intervals. There were no doorless cells here, but heavy bronze-bound teak portals flanked the passage. Gordon went straight to one which was particularly ornately carved and furnished with an unusual fretted arch by way of ornament. He crouched there listening intently, then took a chance and rapped softly on the door. He rapped nine times, with an interval between each three raps.

There was an instant's tense silence, then an impulsive rush of feet across a carpeted floor, and the door was jerked open. A magnificent figure stood framed in the soft light. It was a woman, a lithe, splendid creature whose vibrant figure exuded magnetic vitality. The jewels that sparkled in the girdle about her supple hips were no more scintillant than her eyes.

Instant recognition blazed in those eyes, despite his native garments. She caught him in a fierce grasp. Her slender arms were strong as pliant steel.

"El Borak! I knew you would come!"

Gordon stepped into the chamber and closed the door behind him. A quick glance showed him there was no one there but themselves. Its thick Persian rugs, silk divans, velvet hangings, and gold-chased lamps struck a vivid contrast with the grim plainness of the rest of the temple. Then he turned his full attention again to the woman who stood before him, her white hands clenched in a sort of passionate triumph.

"How did you know I would come, Yasmeena?" he asked.

“You never failed a friend in need,” she answered.

“Who is in need?”

“I!”

“But you are a goddess!”

“I explained it all in my letter!” she exclaimed bewilderedly.

Gordon shook his head. “I have received no letter.”

“Then why are you here?” she demanded in evident puzzlement.

“It’s a long story,” he answered. “Tell me first why Yasmeena, who had the world at her feet and threw it away for weariness to become a goddess in a strange land, should speak of herself as one in need.”

“In desperate need, El Borak.” She raked back her dark locks with a nervously quick hand. Her eyes were shadowed with weariness and something more, something which Gordon had never seen there before — the shadow of fear.

“Here is food you need more than I,” she said as she sank down on a divan and with a dainty foot pushed toward him a small gold table on which were chupaties, curried rice, and broiled mutton, all in gold vessels, and a gold jug of kumiss.

He sat down without comment and began to eat with unfeigned gusto. In his drab camel’s-hair caftan, with the wide sleeves drawn back from his corded brown arms, he looked out of place in that exotic chamber.

Yasmeena watched him broodingly, her chin resting on her hand, her somber eyes enigmatic.

“I did not have the world at my feet, El Borak,” she said presently. “But I had enough of it to sicken me. It became a wine which had lost its savor. Flattery became like an insult; the adulation of men became an empty repetition without meaning. I grew maddeningly weary of the flat fool faces that smirked eternally up at me, all wearing the same sheep expressions and animated by the same sheep thoughts. All except a few men like you, El Borak, and you were wolves in the flock. I might have loved you, El Borak, but

there is something too fierce about you; your soul is a whetted blade on which I feared I might cut myself."

He made no reply, but tilted the golden jug and gulped down enough stinging kumiss to have made an ordinary man's head swim at once. He had lived the life of the nomads so long that their tastes had become his.

"So I became a princess, wife of a prince of Kashmir," she went on, her eyes smoldering with a marvelous shifting of clouds and colors. "I thought I knew the depths of men's swinishness. I found I had much to learn. He was a beast. I fled from him into India, and the British protected me when his ruffians would have dragged me back to him. He still offers many thousand rupees to any who will bring me alive to him, so that he may soothe his vanity by having me tortured to death."

"I have heard a rumor to that effect," answered Gordon.

A recurrent thought caused his face to darken. He did not frown, but the effect was subtly sinister.

"That experience completed my distaste for the life I knew," she said, her dark eyes vividly introspective. "I remembered that my father was a priest of Yolgan who fled away for love of a stranger woman. I had emptied the cup and the bowl was dry. I remembered Yolgan through the tales my father told me when I was a babe, and a great yearning rose in me to lose the world and find my soul. All the gods I knew had proved false to me. The mark of Erlik was upon me —" She parted her pearl-sewn vest and displayed a curious starlike mark between her firm breasts.

"I came to Yolgan as well you know, because you brought me, in the guise of a Kirghiz from Issik-kul. As you know the people remembered my father, and though they looked on him as a traitor, they accepted me as one of them, and because of an old legend which spoke of the star on a woman's bosom, they hailed me as a goddess, the incarnation of the daughter of Erlik Khan.

"For a while after you went away I was content. The people worshiped me with more sincerity than I had ever seen displayed by

the masses of civilization. Their curious rituals were strange and fascinating. Then I began to go further into their mysteries; I began to sense the essence below the formula —" She paused, and Gordon saw the fear grow in her eyes again.

"I had dreamed of a calm retreat of mystics, inhabited by philosophers. I found a haunt of bestial devils, ignorant of all but evil. Mysticism? It is black shamanism, foul as the tundras which bred it. I have seen things that made me afraid. Yes, I, Yasmeena, who never knew the meaning of the word, I have learned fear. Yogok, the high priest, taught me. You warned me against Yogok before you left Yolgan. Well had I heeded you. He hates me. He knows I am not divine, but he fears my power over the people. He would have slain me long ago had he dared.

"I am wearied to death of Yolgan. Erlik Khan and his devils have proved no less an illusion than the gods of India and the West. I have not found the perfect way. I have found only awakened desire to return to the world I cast away.

"I want to go back to Delhi. At night I dream of the noise and smells of the streets and bazaars. I am half Indian, and all the blood of India is calling me. I was a fool. I had life in my hands and did not recognize it."

"Why not go back, then?" asked Gordon.

She shuddered. "I cannot. The gods of Yolgan must remain in Yolgan forever. Should one depart, the people believe the city would perish. Yogok would be glad to see me go, but he fears the fury of the people too much either to slay me or aid me to escape. I knew there was but one man who might help me. I wrote a letter to you and smuggled it out by a Tajik trader. With it I sent my sacred emblem — a jeweled gold star — which would pass you safely through the country of the nomads. They would not harm a man bearing it. He would be safe from all but the priests of the city. I explained that in my letter."

“I never got it,” Gordon answered. “I’m here after a couple of scoundrels whom I was guiding into the Uzbek country, and who for no apparent reason murdered my servant Ahmed and deserted me in the hills. They’re in Yolgan now, somewhere.”

“White men?” she exclaimed. “That is impossible! They could never have got through the tribes —”

“There’s only one key to the puzzle,” he interrupted. “Somehow your letter fell into their hands. They used your star to let them through. They don’t mean to rescue you, because they got in touch with Yogok as soon as they reached the valley. There’s only one thing I can think of — they intend kidnaping you to sell to your former husband.”

She sat up straight; her white hands clenched on the edge of the divan and her eyes flashed. In that instant she looked as splendid and as dangerous as a cobra when it rears up to strike.

“Back to that pig? Where are these dogs? I will speak a word to the people and they shall cease to be!”

“That would betray yourself,” returned Gordon. “The people would kill the strangers, and Yogok, too, maybe, but they’d learn that you’d been trying to escape from Yolgan. They allow you the freedom of the temple, don’t they?”

“Yes; with shaven-headed skulkers spying on my every move, except when I am on this floor, from which only a single stair leads down. That stair is always guarded.”

“By a guard who sleeps,” said Gordon. “That’s bad enough, but if the people found you were trying to escape, they might shut you up in a little cell for the rest of your life. People are particularly careful of their deities.”

She shuddered, and her fine eyes flashed the fear an eagle feels for a cage. “Then what are we to do?”

“I don’t know — yet. I have nearly a hundred Turkoman ruffians hidden up in the hills, but just now they’re more hindrance than help. There’s not enough of them to do much good in a pitched

battle, and they're almost sure to be discovered tomorrow, if not before. I brought them into this mess, and it's up to me to get them out — or as many as I can. I came here to kill these Englishmen, Ormond and Pembroke. But that can wait now. I'm going to get you out of here, but I don't dare move until I know where Yogok and the Englishmen are. Is there anyone in Yolgan you can trust?"

"Any of the people would die for me, but they won't let me go. Only actual harm done me by the monks would stir them up against Yogok. No; I dare trust none of them."

"You say that stair is the only way up onto this floor?"

"Yes. The temple is built against the mountain, and galleries and corridors on the lower floors go back far into the mountain itself. But this is the highest floor, and is reserved entirely for me. There's no escape from it except down through the temple, swarming with monks. I keep only one servant here at night, and she is at present sleeping in a chamber some distance from this and is senseless with bhang as usual."

"Good enough!" grunted Gordon. "Here, take this pistol. Lock the door after I go through and admit no one but myself. You'll recognize me by the nine raps, as usual."

"Where are you going?" she demanded, staring up and mechanically taking the weapon he tendered her, butt first.

"To do a little spying," he answered. "I've got to know what Yogok and the others are doing. If I tried to smuggle you out now, we might run square into them. I can't make plans until I know some of theirs. If they intend sneaking you out tonight, as I think they do, it might be a good idea to let them do it, and then swoop down with the Turkomans and take you away from them, when they've got well away from the city. But I don't want to do that unless I have to. Bound to be shooting and a chance of your getting hit by a stray bullet. I'm going now; listen for my rap."

VI

The mute guard still slumbered on the stair as Gordon glided past him. No lights glinted now as he descended into the lower corridor. He knew the cells were all empty, for the monks slept in chambers on a lower level. As he hesitated, he heard sandals shuffling down the passage in the pitch blackness.

Stepping into one of the cells, he waited until the unseen traveler was opposite him, then he hissed softly. The tread halted and a voice muttered a query.

“Art thou Yatub?” asked Gordon in the gutturals of the Kirghiz. Many of the lower monks were pure Kirghiz in blood and speech.

“Nay,” came the answer. “I am Ojuh. Who art thou?”

“No matter; call me Yogok’s dog if thou wilt. I am a watcher. Have the white men come into the temple yet?”

“Aye. Yogok brought them by the secret way, lest the people suspect their presence. If thou art close to Yogok, tell me — what is his plan?”

“What is thine own opinion?” asked Gordon.

An evil laugh answered him, and he could feel the monk leaning closer in the darkness to rest an elbow on the jamb.

“Yogok is crafty,” he murmured. “When the Tajik whom Yasmeena bribed to bear her letter showed it to Yogok, our master bade him do as she had instructed him. When the man for whom she sent came for her, Yogok planned to slay both him and her, making it seem to the people that the white man had slain their goddess.”

“Yogok is not forgiving,” said Gordon at a venture.

“A cobra is more so.” The monk laughed. “Yasmeena has thwarted him too often in the matter of sacrifices for him to allow her to depart in peace.”

“Yet such is now his plan!” asserted Gordon.

“Nay; thou art a simple man, for one who calls himself a watcher. The letter was meant for El Borak. But the Tajik was greedy and sold it to these sahibs and told them of Yogok. They will not take

her to India. They will sell her to a prince in Kashmir who will have her beaten to death with a slipper. Yogok himself will guide them through the hills by the secret route. He is in terror of the people, but his hate for Yasmeena overcomes him."

Gordon had heard all he wished to know, and he was in a sudden rush to be gone. He had abandoned his tentative plan of letting Ormond get the girl outside the city before rescuing her. With Yogok guiding the Englishmen through hidden passes, he might find it impossible to overtake them.

The monk, however, was in no hurry to conclude the conversation. He began speaking again, and then Gordon saw a light moving like a glowworm in the blackness, and he heard a swift patter of bare feet and a man breathing heavily. He drew farther back into the cell.

It was another monk who came up the corridor, carrying a small brass lamp that lighted his broad, thin-lipped face and made him look something like a Mongolian devil.

As he saw the monk outside the cell, he began hastily: "Yogok and the white men have gone to Yasmeena's chamber. The girl, her servant who spied upon her, has told us that the white devil El Borak is in Yolgan. He talked with Yasmeena less than half an hour agone. The girl sped to Yogok as swiftly as she dared, but she dared not stir until he had left Yasmeena's chamber. He is somewhere in the temple. I gather men to search. Come with me, thou, and thou also —"

He swung the lamp about so that it shone full on Gordon, crouching in the cell. As the man blinked to see the garments of a shepherd instead of the familiar robes of a monk, Gordon lashed out for his jaw, quick and silent as the stroke of a python. The monk went down like a man shot in the head, and even as the lamp smashed on the floor, Gordon had leaped and grappled with the other man in the sudden darkness.

A single cry rang to the vaulted roof before it was strangled in the corded throat. The monk was hard to hold as a snake, and he kept

groping for a knife, but as they crashed into the stone wall, Gordon smashed his opponent's head savagely against it. The man went limp and Gordon flung him down beside the other senseless shape.

The next instant Gordon was racing up the stairway. It was only a few steps from the cell where he had hidden, its upper portion dim in the subdued light of the upper corridor. He knew no one had gone up or down while he talked with the monk. Yet the man with the lamp had said that Yogok and the others had gone to Yasmeena's chamber, and that her treacherous servant girl had come to them.

He rounded the crook with reckless haste, his scimitar ready, but the slumping figure at the stairhead did not rise to oppose him. There was a new sag in the mute's shoulders as he huddled on the steps. He had been stabbed in the back, so fiercely that the spinal column had been severed with one stroke.

Gordon wondered why the priest should kill one of his own servants, but he did not pause; premonition gripping his heart, he hurled himself down the corridor and in through the arched doorway, which was unbolted. The chamber was empty. Cushions from the divan were strewn on the floor. Yasmeena was nowhere to be seen.

Gordon stood like a statue in the center of the room, his scimitar in his hand. The blue sheen of the light on steel was no more deadly than the glitter of his black eyes. His gaze swept the room, lingering no longer on a slight bulge in the hangings on the rear wall than anywhere else.

He turned toward the door, took a step — then wheeled and raced across the chamber like a gust of wind, slashing and hacking at the tapestry before the man hiding there realized he was discovered. The keen edge ribboned the velvet arras and blood spurted; out of the tatters a figure toppled to the floor — a shaven monk, literally cut to pieces. He had dropped his knife and could only grovel and moan, clutching at his spurting arteries.

“Where is she?” snarled Gordon, panting with passion as he crouched over his hideous handiwork. “Where is she?”

But the man only whimpered and yammered and died without speaking.

Gordon ran to the walls and began ripping the hangings away. Somewhere he knew there must be a secret door. But the walls showed blank, resisting his most violent efforts. He could not follow Yasmeena by the route her abductors had obviously carried her. He must escape from the city and hasten to the cave, where the servants were hidden, and to which the Englishmen would undoubtedly return. He was sweating with the violence of his rage, which almost submerged caution. He ripped off the camel’s hair robe, feeling in his frenzy that it cramped and hampered him.

But the action brought a thought born of cold reason. The garments of the senseless monks in the corridor below would furnish him a disguise which would aid him to pass unhindered through the temple, where he knew scores of shaven-headed murderers were hunting him.

He ran silently from the chamber, passed the sprawling corpse, rounded the turn of the stair — then he stopped short. The lower corridor was a blaze of light, and at the foot of the stairs stood a mass of monks, holding torches and swords. He saw rifles in the hands of a dozen.

Details sprang out in startling clarity in the instant that the monks yelled and raised their rifles. Beyond them he saw a round-faced slant-eyed girl crouching by the wall. She grasped a rope which hung down the wall and jerked, and Gordon felt the stairs give way beneath him. The rifles roared in a ragged volley as he shot down the black opening which gaped beneath his feet, and the bullets whined over his head. A fierce cry of triumph rose from the monks. His instinctive throwing up of his arms as he fell was much like the action of a man struck by flying lead.

VII

After Gordon left her, Yasmeena made fast the door and returned to her divan. She idly studied the big pistol he had left with her, fascinated by the blue gleam of the light on its dully polished steel.

Then she tossed it aside and lay back with her eyes closed. There was a certain sophistication or innate mysticism in her which refused to let her put much faith in material weapons. Hers was that overrefinement of civilization which instinctively belittles physical action. With all her admiration for Gordon, he was, after all, to her, a barbarian who put his trust in lead and steel.

She undervalued the weapon he had left with her, and so it was out of her reach when the noise of a swishing tapestry roused her. She turned and stared at the rear wall with eyes suddenly dilated. Behind the hanging she knew — or thought she knew — was solid stone wall, built hard against the sheer mountainside.

But now that hanging lifted, grasped in a yellow clawlike hand. The hand was followed by a face — an evil, leering, grayish face, with slanted eyes and lank hair falling over a narrow forehead. A thin gash of a mouth gaped, revealing pointed teeth.

She was so astounded that she sat frozen, unable to supply the simple explanation of the phenomenon, until the man entered the room with a slithering silence repulsively suggestive of a snake. Then she saw that a black opening gaped in the wall behind the lifted arras, and two faces were framed in it — white men's faces, hard and inexorable as stone.

She sprang up then and snatched for the revolver, but it was at the other end of the divan. She ran around for it, but the slant-eyed man, with a motion incredibly quick, was before her and crushed her cruelly in his lean arms, clapping a hand over her mouth. He heeded the twisting and writhing of her supple body no more than the struggles of a child.

"Swift!" he ordered in harsh gutturals. "Bind her!"

The white men had followed him into the chamber, but it was a monk who obeyed, adding a velvet gag. One of the white men picked up the pistol.

“See to the mute who slumbers on the stairs,” her captor ordered. “He is not our man, but a creature set by the people to guard her. Even a mute can speak by gestures sometimes.”

The evil-faced monk bowed deeply and, unbolting the door, went out, thumbing a long knife. Another monk stood in the secret entrance.

“You did not know of the hidden door,” jeered the slant-eyed man. “You fool! The mountain below this temple is honeycombed with tunnels. You have been spied on constantly. The girl whom you thought drunk on bhang watched tonight while you talked with El Borak. That will not alter my plans any, though, except that I have set my monks to slay El Borak.

“Then we will show the people his body and tell them that you have returned to your father in the Seventh Hell because Yolgan has been polluted by the presence of a Feringhi! In the meantime these sahibs will be well on their way to Kashmir with you, my lovely goddess! Daughter of Erlik! Bah!”

“We’re wasting time, Yogok,” broke in Ormond roughly. “Once in the hills, you say, we won’t meet any of the Kirghiz, but I want to be far from Yolgan by daylight. If we meet anybody with this girl, they’ll cut our throats.”

The priest nodded and motioned to the monk who came forward and lifted Yasmeena onto a litter he carried. Pembroke took the other end. At that moment the other monk glided back into the chamber, wiping blood from his curved blade.

Yogok directed him to hide behind the hangings. “El Borak might return before the others find him.”

Then they passed through the hidden door into darkness lighted by a butter lamp in Yogok’s hand. The priest slid to the heavy section of stone that formed part of the wall and made it fast with a bronze bar. Yasmeena saw by the small light of the lamp that they were in

a narrow corridor which slanted downward at a pitch which grew steeper until it ended in a long narrow stair cut out of solid rock.

At the bottom of this stair they struck a level tunnel which they followed for some time, the Englishmen and the monk alternating with the litter. It ended at last in a wall of rock, in the center of which was a stone block which worked on a pivot. This turned, they emerged into a cave, at the mouth of which stars were visible through a tangle of branches.

When Yogok pushed the block back in place its rough exterior looked like part of a solid wall. He extinguished the lamp and a moment later was pushing aside the massed willows which masked the cave mouth. As they emerged into the starlight, Yasmeena saw that these willows stood on the bank of a stream.

When her captors had pushed through the trees, waded the shallow channel, and ascended the farther bank, she saw a cluster of lights off to her right. Those lights were Yolgan. They had followed tunnels cut into the solid rock of the mountain and had come out at its foot less than half a mile from the city. Directly ahead of her the forest lifted in rows of black ramparts, and off to the left the hills climbed in marching lines.

Her captors set off through the starlight, their apparent objective a jutting shoulder less than half a mile to the east. The distance was covered in silence. The nervousness of the white men was no more evident than that of Yogok. Each man was thinking what his fate would be if the common people of Yolgan discovered them kidnaping their goddess.

Yogok's fear was greater than that of the Englishmen. He had covered his tracks with corpses — the shepherd who had brought him Ormond's message, the mute guardian of the stairs; his teeth chattered as he conjured up possibilities. El Borak must die without speaking, also; that, he had drilled into the monks.

“Faster! Faster!” he urged, a note of panic in his voice as he glared at the black forest walls about him. In the moan of the night wind he seemed to hear the stealthy tread of pursuers.

“Here’s the cave,” grunted Ormond. “Set her down; no use lugging her up that slope. I’ll go get the servants and the horses. We’ll mount her on one of the pack animals. Have to leave some of our stuff behind, anyhow. Ohai, Akbar!” he called softly.

There was no answer. The fire had gone out in the cave and the mouth gaped black and silent.

“Have they gone to sleep?” Ormond swore irritably. “I’ll jolly well wake ’em. Wait!”

He ran lightly up the rough ramp and vanished in the cave. A moment later his voice reached them, echoing hollowly between the rocky walls. The echoes did not disguise the sudden fear in his voice.

VIII

When Gordon fell through the treacherous stairs, he shot downward in utter blackness to land on solid stone. Not one man in a hundred could have survived the fall with unsmashed bones, but El Borak was all knit wires and steel springs. He landed on all fours, catlike, with bent joints absorbing the shock. Even so his whole body was numbed, and his limbs crumpled under him, letting his frame dash violently against the stone.

He lay there half stunned for a space, then pulled himself together, cursing the stinging and tingling of his hands and feet, and felt himself for broken bones.

Thankful to find himself intact, he groped for and found the scimitar which he had cast from him as he fell. Above him the trap had closed. Where he was he had no idea, but it was dark as a Stygian vault. He wondered how far he had fallen, and felt that it was farther than anyone would ever believe, supposing he escaped to tell of it. He felt about in the darkness and found that he was in a square cell of no great dimensions. The one door was locked on the outside.

His investigations took him only a matter of seconds, and it was while he was feeling the door that he heard someone fumbling at it on the other side. He drew back, believing that those who dropped him into the cell would scarcely have had time to reach it by a safer way. He believed it was someone who had heard the sound of his fall and was coming to investigate, doubtless expecting to find a corpse on the floor.

The door was cast open and light blinded him, but he cut at the vague figure which loomed in the open door. Then his eyes could

see and they saw a monk lying on the floor of a narrow lamp-lighted corridor with his shaven head split to the temples. The passage was empty except for the dead man.

The floor of the corridor sloped slightly, and Gordon went down it, because to go up it would obviously be returning toward his enemies. He momentarily expected to hear them howling on his heels, but evidently they considered that his fall through the trap, riddled, as they thought, with bullets, was sufficient and were in no hurry to verify their belief. Doubtless it was the duty of the monk he had killed to finish off victims dropped through the trap on the stairs.

The corridor made a sharp turn to the right and the lamps no longer burned along the walls. Gordon took one of them and went on, finding that the pitch of the slope grew steeper until he was forced to check his descent with a hand braced against the wall. These walls were solid rock, and he knew he was in the mountain on which the temple was built.

He did not believe any of the inhabitants of Yolgan knew of these tunnels except the monks; certainly Yasmeena was ignorant of them. Thought of the girl made him wince. Heaven alone knew where she was, just then, but he could not aid her until he had escaped himself from these rat-runs.

Presently the passage turned at right angles into a broader tunnel which ran level, and he followed it hastily but cautiously, holding his lamp high. Ahead of him he saw the tunnel end at last against a rough stone wall in which a door was set in the shape of a ponderous square block. This, he discovered, was hung on a pivot, and it revolved with ease, letting him through into a cave beyond.

As Yasmeena had seen the stars among the branches not long before, Gordon now discovered them. He put out his lamp, halted an instant to let his eyes get used to the sudden darkness, and then started toward the cavern mouth.

Just as he reached it, he crouched back. Somebody was splashing through the water outside, thrashing through the willows. The man

came panting up the short steep slope, and Gordon saw the evil face of Yogok in the starlight before the man became a shapeless blob of blackness as he plunged into the cavern.

The next instant El Borak sprang, bearing his man to the floor. Yogok let out one hair-raising yell, and then Gordon found his throat and crouched over him, savagely digging and twisting his fingers in the priest's neck.

"Where is Yasmeena?" he demanded.

A gurgle answered him. He relaxed his grip a trifle and repeated the question. Yogok was mad with fear of this attack in the dark, but somehow — probably by the body-scent or the lack of it — he divined that his captor was a white man.

"Are you El Borak?" he gasped.

"Who else? Where is Yasmeena?" Gordon emphasized his command by a wrench which brought a gurgle of pain from Yogok's thin lips.

"The Englishmen have her!" he panted.

"Where are they?"

"Nay; I know not! Ahhh! Mercy, sahib! I will tell!"

Yogok's eyes glimmered white with fear in the darkness. His lean body was shaking as with an ague.

"We took her to a cave where the sahibs' servants were hidden. They were gone, with the horses. The Englishmen accused me of treachery. They said I had made away with their servants and meant to murder them. They lied. By Erlik, I know not what became of their cursed Pathans! The Englishmen attacked me, but I fled while a servant of mine fought with them."

Gordon hauled him to his feet, faced him toward the cave mouth and bound his hands behind him with his own girdle.

"We're going back," he said grimly. "One yelp out of you and I'll let out your snake's soul. Guide me as straight to Ormond's cave as you know."

“Nay; the dogs will slay me!”

“I’ll kill you if you don’t,” Gordon assured him, pushing Yogok stumbling before him.

The priest was not a back-to-the-wall fighter. Confronted by two perils he chose the more remote. They waded the stream and on the other side Yogok turned to the right. Gordon jerked him back.

“I know where I am now,” he growled. “And I know where the cave is. It’s in that jut of land to the left. If there’s a path through the pines, show it to me.”

Yogok surrendered and hurried through the shadows, conscious of Gordon’s grasp on his collar and the broad edge of Gordon’s scimitar glimmering near. It was growing toward the darkness that precedes dawn as they came to the cave which loomed dark and silent among the trees.

“They are gone!” Yogok shivered.

“I didn’t expect to find them here,” muttered Gordon. “I came here to pick up their trail. If they thought you’d set the natives on them, they’d pull out on foot. What worries me is what they did with Yasmeena.”

“Listen!”

Yogok started convulsively as a low moan smote the air.

Gordon threw him and lashed together his hands and feet. “Not a sound out of you!” he warned, and then stole up the ramp, sword ready.

At the mouth he hesitated unwilling to show himself against the dim starlight behind him. Then he heard the moan again and knew it was not feigned. It was a human being in mortal agony.

He felt his way into the darkness and presently stumbled over something yielding, which evoked another moan. His hands told him it was a man in European clothing. Something warm and oozy

smeared his hands as he groped. Feeling in the man's pockets he found a box of matches and struck one, cupping it in his hands.

A livid face with glassy eyes stared up at him.

"Pembroke!" muttered Gordon.

The sound of his name seemed to rouse the dying man. He half rose on an elbow, blood trickling from his mouth with the effort.

"Ormond!" he whispered ghastily. "Have you come back? Damn you, I'll do for you yet —"

"I'm not Ormond," growled the American. "I'm Gordon. It seems somebody has saved me the trouble of killing you. Where's Yasmeena?"

"He took her away." The Englishman's voice was scarcely intelligible, choked by the flow of blood. "Ormond, the dirty swine! We found the cave empty — knew old Yogok had betrayed us. We jumped him. He ran away. His damned monk stabbed me. Ormond took Yasmeena and the monk and went away. He's mad. He's going to try to cross the mountains on foot, with the girl, and the monk to guide him. And he left me to die, the swine, the filthy swine!" The dying man's voice rose to a hysterical shriek; he heaved himself up, his eyes glaring; then a terrible shudder ran through his body and he was dead. Gordon rose, struck another match and swept a glance over the cave. It was utterly bare. Not a firearm in sight. Ormond had evidently robbed his dying partner. Ormond, starting through the mountains with a captive woman, and a treacherous monk for a guide, on foot and with no provisions — surely the man must be mad. Returning to Yogok he unbound his legs, repeating Pembroke's tale in a few words. He saw the priest's eyes gleam in the starlight. "Good! They will all die in the mountains! Let them go!"

"We're following them," Gordon answered. "You know the way the monk will lead Ormond. Show it to me." A restoration of confidence had wakened insolence and defiance. "No! Let them die!" With a searing curse Gordon caught the priest's throat and jammed his head back between his shoulders, until his eyes were glaring at the stars. "Damn you!" he ground between his teeth,

shaking the man as a dog shakes a rat. “If you try to balk me now I’ll kill you the slowest way I know. Do you want me to drag you back to Yolgan and tell the people what you plotted against the daughter of Erlik Khan? They’ll kill me, but they’ll flay you alive!” Yogok knew Gordon would not do that, not because the American feared death, but because to sacrifice himself would be to remove Yasmeena’s last hope. But Gordon’s glaring eyes made him cold with fear; he sensed the abysmal rage that gripped the white man and knew that El Borak was on the point of tearing him limb from limb. In that moment there was no bloody deed of which Gordon was not capable. “Stay, sahib!” Yogok gasped. “I will guide you.”

“And guide me right!” Gordon jerked him savagely to his feet. “They have been gone less than an hour. If we don’t overtake them by sunrise, I’ll know you’ve led me astray, and I’ll tie you head down to a cliff for the vultures to eat alive.”

IX

In the darkness before dawn Yogok led Gordon up into the hills by a narrow trail that wound among ravines and windy crags, climbing ever southward. The eternal lights of Yolgan fell away behind them, growing smaller and smaller with distance.

They left half a mile to the east of the gorge where the Turkomans were concealed. Gordon ardently wished to get his men out of that ravine before dawn, but he dared not take the time now. His eyes burned from lack of sleep and moments of giddiness assailed him, but the fire of his driving energy burned fiercer than ever. He urged the priest to greater and greater speed until sweat dripped like water from the man’s trembling limbs.

“He’ll practically have to drag the girl. She’ll fight him every step of the way. And he’ll have to beat the monk every now and then to make him point out the right path. We ought to be gaining on them at every step.”

Full dawn found them climbing a ledge that pitched up around a gigantic shoulder where the wind staggered them. Then, off to the left sounded a sudden rattle of rifle fire. The wind brought it in snatches. Gordon turned, loosing his binoculars. They were high above the ridges and hills that rimmed the valley.

He could see Yolgan in the distance, like a huddle of toy blocks. He could see the gorges that debouched into the valley spread out like the finger of a hand. He saw the gorge in which his Turkomans had taken refuge. Black dots which he knew were men were scattered among the boulders at the canyon mouth and up on the rims of the walls; tiny white puffs spurted.

Even before he brought his glasses into play he knew that the pursuing Kirghiz had at last smelled his men out. The Turkomans were bottled in the gorge. He saw puffs of smoke jetting from the rocks that from the mountainside overhung the ravine leading out of the canyon. Strings of dots moved out of the gates of Yolgan, which were men coming to investigate the shooting. Doubtless the Kirghiz had sent riders to bring the men of the city.

Yogok shrieked and fell down flat on the ledge. Gordon felt his cap tugged from his head as if by an invisible hand, and there came to him the flat sharp crack of a rifle.

He dropped behind a boulder and began scanning the narrow, sheer-walled plateau upon which the ledge debouched. Presently a head and part of a shoulder rose above a shelf of rock, and then a rifle came up and spoke flatly. The bullet knocked a chip out of the boulder near Gordon's elbow.

Ormond had been making even poorer time than Gordon hoped, and seeing his pursuer gaining, had turned to make a fight of it. That he recognized Gordon was evident from his mocking shouts. There was a hint of hysteria in them.

Yogok was too helpless with terror to do anything but hug the ledge and moan. Gordon began working his way toward the Englishman. Evidently Ormond did not know that he had no firearm. The sun was not yet above the peaks when it turned to fire,

and the light and atmosphere of those altitudes make for uncertain shooting.

Ormond blazed away as Gordon flitted from ridge to boulder and from rock to ledge, and sometimes his lead whispered perilously close. But Gordon was gliding ever nearer, working his way so that the sun would be behind him when it rose. Something about that silent shadowy figure that he could not hit began to shake Ormond's nerve; it was more like being stalked by a leopard than by a human being.

Gordon could not see Yasmeena, but presently he saw the monk. The man took advantage of a moment when Ormond was loading his rifle. He sprang up from behind the ledge with his hands tied behind his back, and scudded across the rock like a rabbit. Ormond, like a man gone mad, jerked a pistol and put a bullet between his shoulders, and he stumbled and slid screaming over the thousand-foot edge.

Gordon broke cover, too, and came ripping across the treacherous rock like a gust of hill wind. As he came the sun burst up over a ridge behind him, full in Ormond's eyes. The Englishman yelled incoherently, trying to shade his eyes with his left arm, and began firing half-blindly. The bullets ripped past Gordon's head or knocked up splinters of stone at his speeding feet. Panic had Ormond, and he was firing without proper aim.

Then the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Another stride and Gordon would reach him with that hovering arc of steel that the sun turned crimson. Ormond hurled the pistol blindly, yelling "You damned werewolf! I'll cheat you yet!" and bounded far out, arms outspread.

His feet struck the sloping lip of a fissure and he shot down and vanished so suddenly it was like the unreality of a dream.

Gordon reached the crevice and glared down into echoing darkness. He could see nothing, but the chasm seemed bottomless. With an angry shrug he turned away, disappointed.

Behind the stony shelf Gordon found Yasmeena lying with her arms bound, where Ormond had flung her down. Her soft slippers hung in tatters, and the bruises and abrasions on her tender flesh told of Ormond's brutal attempts to force her at top speed along the rocky path.

Gordon cut her cords and she caught his arms with all her old fierceness of passion. There was no fear in her eyes now, only wild excitement.

"They said you were dead!" she cried. "I knew they lied! They cannot kill you any more than they can kill the mountains or the wind that blows across them! You have Yogok. I saw him. He knows the secret paths better than the monk Ormond killed. Let us go, while the Kirghiz are killing the Turkomans! What if we have no supplies? It is summer. We shall not freeze. We can starve for a while if need be. Let us go!"

"I brought those men to Yolgan with me for my own purposes, Yasmeena," he replied. "Even for you I can't desert them."

She nodded her splendid head. "I expected that from you, El Borak."

Ormond's rifle lay near by but there were no cartridges for it. He cast it over the precipice and, taking Yasmeena's hand, led her back to the ledge where Yogok lay yammering, too terrified to try to escape with his hands tied.

Gordon hauled him erect and pointed to the gorge where the white puffs spurted.

"Is there a way to reach that gorge without returning to the valley? Your life depends on it."

"Half these gorges have hidden exits," answered Yogok, shivering. "That one has. But I cannot guide you along that route with my arms tied."

Gordon unbound his hands, but tied the girdle about the priest's waist and retained the other end in his hand. "Lead on," he ordered.

Yogok led them back along the ledge they had just traversed to a point where, halfway along it, it was cut by a great natural causeway of solid stone. They made their way along it, with dizzy depths echoing on either hand, to a broad ledge which skirted a deep canyon. They followed this ledge around a colossal crag and after a while Yogok plunged into a cave which opened upon the narrow path.

This they traversed in semidarkness relieved by light which filtered in from a ragged crevice in the roof. The cave wound steeply downward, following a fault in the rock, and they came out at last in a triangular cleft between towering walls. The narrow slit which was the cave mouth opened in a side of the cleft and was masked from outer view by a spur of rock that looked like part of a solid wall. Gordon had looked into that cleft the day before and failed to discover the cave.

The sound of firing had grown louder as they advanced along the twisting cave, and now it filled the defile with thundering echoes. They were in the gorge of the Turkomans. Gordon saw the wiry warriors crouching among the boulders at the mouth, firing at the fur-capped heads which appeared among the rocks of the outer slopes.

He shouted before they saw him, and they nearly shot him before they recognized him. He went toward them, dragging Yogok with him, and the warriors stared in silent amazement at the shivering priest and the girl in her tattered finery. She scarcely noticed them; they were wolves whose fangs she did not fear; all her attention was centered on Gordon. When a bullet whined near her she did not flinch.

Men crouched at the mouth of the ravine, firing into it. Bullets hummed back up the gut.

“They stole up in the darkness,” grunted Orkhan, binding up a bleeding bullet hole in his forearm. “They had the gorge mouth surrounded before our sentries saw them. They cut the throat of the sentry we had stationed down the ravine and came stealing up it.

Had not others in the gorge seen them and opened fire, they would have cut all our throats while we slept. Aye, they were like cats that see in the dark. What shall we do, El Borak? We are trapped. We cannot climb these walls. There is the spring, and grass for the horses, and we have slept, but we have no food left and our ammunition will not last forever."

Gordon took a yataghan from one of the men and handed it to Yasmeena.

"Watch Yogok," he directed. "Stab him if he seeks to escape."

And from the flash of her eyes he knew that she at last realized the value of direct action in its proper place, and that she would not hesitate to carry out his order. Yogok looked like a singed serpent in his fury, but he feared Yasmeena as much as he did Gordon.

El Borak collected a rifle and a handful of cartridges on his way to the boulder-strewn gorge mouth. Three Turkomans lay dead among the rocks and others were wounded. The Kirghiz were working their way up the outer slope on foot from rock to rock, trying to get in to close quarters where their superior numbers would count, but not willing to sacrifice too many lives to get there. Up from the city a ragged line of men was streaming through the pines.

"We've got to get out of this trap before the monks come up with the Kirghiz and lead them up in the hills and down through that cave," Gordon muttered.

He could see them already toiling up the first ridges of the hills, shouting frantically to the tribesmen as they came. Working in fierce haste he told off half a dozen men on the best horses, and mounting Yogok and Yasmeena on spare steeds, he ordered the priest to lead the Turkomans back through the cave. To Orkhan Shah he gave instructions to follow Yasmeena's orders, and so imbued with trust was the Turkoman that he made no objections to obeying a woman.

Three of the men remaining with him Gordon stationed at the ravine, and with the other three he held the mouth of the canyon. They began firing as the others urged their horses down the defile. The men on the lower slopes sensed that the volleys were

diminishing and came storming up the acclivities, only to take cover again as they were swept by a hail of lead, the deadly accuracy of which made up for its lack of volume. Gordon's presence heartened his men and they put new spirit in their rifle work.

When the last rider had disappeared into the cleft, Gordon waited until he thought the fugitives had time enough to traverse the winding cave, and then he fell back swiftly, picked up the men at the ravine, and raced for the hidden exit. The men outside suspected a trap in the sudden cessation of the firing, and they held back for long minutes, during which time Gordon and his men were galloping through the twisting cavern, their hoofs filling the narrow gut with thunder.

The others awaited them on the ledge skirting the ravine and Gordon sent them hurrying on. He cursed because he could not be at two places at once — at the head of the column bullying Yogok, and at the rear watching for the first of the pursuers to ride out on the ledge. But Yasmeena, flourishing the knife at the priest's throat, was guarantee against treachery at the front. She had sworn to sink the blade in his breast if the Kirghiz came within rifle range, and Yogok sweated with fear and himself urged the band onward.

They moved around the corner of the crag and out across the ridge, a knife-edged causeway half a mile in length, with a sheet of rock slanting steeply down for a thousand feet on either hand.

Gordon waited alone at the angle of the ledge. When his party was moving like insects along the crest of the ridge, the first of the Kirghiz came racing out on the ledge. Sitting his horse behind a jutting spur of rock, Gordon lined his sights carefully and fired. It was a long range, even for him; so long that he missed the first rider and hit the horse instead.

The stricken beast reared high, screaming, and plunged backward. The ledge was narrow where the cave opened on it. The screams and plunges of the maddened animal, before it toppled over the edge, put the horses in confusion behind it. Three more got out of

control and were carried over the cliff with their riders, and the other Kirghiz retreated into the cave. After a while they tried again, but a bullet spattering on the rock sent them scurrying back.

A glance over his shoulder showed Gordon his horsemen just dropping off the ridge onto the farther ledge. He reined about and sent his horse flying along the path. If he loitered, the Kirghiz might venture out again, find no one opposing them, and reach the bend of the trail in time to pick him off the causeway.

Most of his hardened band had dismounted, leading their horses at a walk. Gordon rode at a gallop with death yawning on either hand if the horse slipped or put a single foot wrong. But the beast was sure-footed as a mountain sheep.

Gordon's head swam from lack of sleep as he glanced down into the blue haze of the abyss, but he did not slacken his pace. When he dropped down the slope onto the ledge where Yasmeena stood, white-faced and her nails biting into her pink palms, the Kirghiz had not yet appeared.

Gordon pushed his riders as hard as he dared, making them from time to time change to the spare horses, to save the animals as much as possible. Nearly a dozen of these still remained. Many of the men were giddy with dizziness caused by hunger and the altitude. He himself was mad for sleep and kept himself awake only by an effort of will that made the hills reel to his gaze.

He kept his grip on clarity of purpose as only a man toughened by a savagely hard life can do, and led them on, following the paths Yogok pointed out. They skirted ledges that hovered over ravines the bottoms of which were lost in shadowy gloom. They plunged through defiles like a knife cut where sheer walls rose up to the skies on either hand.

Behind them from time to time they heard faint yells, and once, when they toiled up over the shoulder of a breathtaking crag on a path where the horses fought for footing, they saw their pursuers far below and behind them. The Kirghiz and monks were not

maintaining such a suicidal pace; hate is seldom as desperate as the will to live.

The snowy crest of Mount Erlik loomed higher and higher before them, and Yogok, when questioned, swore that the way to safety lay through the mountain. More he would not say; he was green with fear, and his mind held to but one thought — to keep the trail that would buy his life. He feared his captors no more than he feared that his pursuing subjects would overtake them and learn of his duplicity in regard to their goddess.

They pushed on like men already dead, beginning to stagger with weakness and exhaustion. The horses drooped and stumbled. The wind was like whetted steel. Darkness was gathering when they followed the backbone of a giant ridge which ran like a natural causeway to the sheer slope of Mount Erlik Khan.

The mountain towered gigantically above them, a brutish mass of crags and dizzy escarpments and colossal steeps, with the snow-clad pinnacle, glimpsed between the great spurs, dominating all. The ridge ended at a ledge high up among the cliffs, and in the sheer rock there stood a bronze door, thickly carved with inscriptions that Gordon could not decipher. It was heavy enough to have resisted an attack of artillery.

“This is sacred to Erlik,” said Yogok, but he showed about as much reverence as one of the Mohammedans. “Push against the door. Nay; fear not. On my life, there is no trap.”

“On your life it is,” Gordon assured him grimly, and himself set a shoulder to the door, almost falling as he dismounted.

X

The ponderous portal swung inward with a smoothness that showed the antique hinges had recently been oiled. A makeshift torch revealed the entrance to a tunnel, cut in solid rock. A few feet from the door the tunnel opened out like the neck of a bottle, and the

flickering torch, held at the entrance, only hinted at the vastness of its dimensions.

“This tunnel runs clear through the mountain,” said Yogok. “By dawn we can be out of reach of those who follow, because even if they climb over the mountain by the most direct route, they must go by foot and it will take them all the rest of the night and all of another day. If they skirt the mountain and work their way through the passes of the surrounding hills, it will take them even longer; and their horses are weary, too.

“That is the way I was going to guide Ormond. I was not going to take him through the mountain. But it is the only way of escape for you. There is food here. At certain seasons of the year the monks work here. In that cell there are lamps.”

He pointed to a small chamber cut in the rock just inside the doorway. Gordon lighted several of the butter lamps, and gave them to the Turkomans to carry. He dared not follow the course which caution suggested and ride ahead to investigate before he led his men into the tunnel. The pursuers were too close behind them. He must bar the big door and plunge on, trusting the priest’s desire to save his own skin.

When the men were all in the tunnel, Yogok directed the barring of the door — giant bronze bars, thick as a man’s leg. It took half a dozen of the weakened Turkomans to lift one, but once they were in place, Gordon was certain that nothing short of siege guns could force the ton-heavy door, with its massive bronze sills and jambs set deep in the living rock.

He made Yogok ride between him and Orkhan, the Turkoman holding a lamp. There was no use trusting Yogok, even though the priest was getting some satisfaction out of the thought that he was at least ridding himself of the “goddess” he feared and hated, although it meant forgoing his vengeance on her.

Even with all his faculties occupied in a savage battle to keep from falling senseless with exhaustion, Gordon found space to be amazed at what the light showed him. He had never dreamed of the

existence of such a place. Thirty men could have ridden abreast in the cavernlike passage, and the roof soared out of sight in some places; in others stalactites reflected the light in a thousand scintillant colors.

The floors and walls were as even as man-shaped marble, and Gordon wondered how many centuries had been required for the hand-cutting and smoothing of them. Cells appeared at irregular intervals, cut in the rock at the sides, and presently he saw marks of pick work, and then caught sight of dull yellow.

The light showed him the incredible truth. The tales of Mount Erlik Khan were true. The walls were patterned with veins of gold that could be dug out of the rock with a knife point.

The Turkomans, who smelled loot as vultures smell carrion, woke suddenly out of their daze of fatigue and began to take an almost painfully intense interest.

“This is where the monks get their gold, sahib,” said Orkhan, his eyes blazing in the lamplight. “Let me twist the old one’s toes for a space, and he will tell us where they have hidden that which they have dug out of the walls.”

But “the old one” did not need persuasion. He pointed out a square-hewn chamber in which stood stacks of peculiarly shaped objects that were ingots of virgin gold. In other, larger cells were the primitive contrivances with which they smelted the ore and cast the metal.

“Take what ye will,” said Yogok indifferently. “A thousand horses could not carry away the gold we have cast and stored, and we have scarcely dipped into the richness of the veins.”

Thin lips were licked greedily, drooping mustaches twisted in emotion, and eyes that burned like hawks’ were turned questioningly on Gordon.

“Ye have spare horses,” he suggested, and that was enough for them.

After that nothing could have convinced them that everything which had passed had not been planned by Gordon in order to lead them to the gold which was the plunder he had promised them. They loaded the extra ponies until he interfered, to save the animals' strength. Then they hacked off chunks of the soft gold and stuffed their pouches and belts and girdles, and even so they had scarcely diminished the stacks. Some of the raiders lifted up their voices and wept when they saw how much they must leave behind.

"Assuredly," they promised each other, "we shall return with wagons and many horses and secure every crumb of it, *inshallah!"*

"Dogs!" swore Gordon. "Ye have each man a fortune beyond your dreams. Are ye jackals to feast on carrion until your bellies burst? Will ye loiter here until the Kirghiz cross the mountain and cut us off? What of gold then, you crop-eared rogues?"

Of more interest to the American was a cell where barley was stored in leather sacks, and he made the tribesmen load some of the horses with food instead of gold. They grumbled but they obeyed him. They would obey him now, if he ordered them to ride with him into Jehannum.

Every nerve in his body shrieked for sleep, submerging hunger, but he gnawed a handful of raw barley and flogged his failing powers with the lash of his driving will. Yasmeena drooped in her saddle wearily, but her eyes shone unclouded in the lamplight, and Gordon was dully aware of a deep respect for her that dwarfed even his former admiration.

They rode on through that glittering, dream-palace cavern, the tribesmen munching barley and babbling ecstatically of the joys their gold would buy, and at last they came to a bronze door which was a counterpart of the one at the other end of the tunnel. It was not barred. Yogok maintained that none but the monks had visited Mount Erlik in centuries. The door swung inward at their efforts and they blinked in the glow of a white dawn.

They were looking out on a small ledge from which a narrow trail wound along the edge of a giant escarpment. On one side the land fell away sheer for thousands of feet, so that a stream at the bottom looked like a thread of silver, and on the other a sheer cliff rose for some five hundred feet.

This cliff limited the view to the left, but to the right Gordon could see some of the mountains which flanked Mount Erlik Khan, and the valley far below them wandered southward away to a pass in the distance, a notch in the savage rampart of the hills.

“This is life for you, El Borak,” said Yogok, pointing to the pass. “Three miles from the spot where we now stand this trail leads down into the valley where there is water and game and rich grass for the horses. You can follow it southward beyond the pass for three days’ journey when you will come into country you know well. It is inhabited by marauding tribes, but they will not attack a party as large as yours. You can be through the pass before the Kirghiz round the mountain, and they will not follow you through it. That is the limit of their country. Now let me go.”

“Not yet; I’ll release you at the pass. You can make your way back here easily and wait for the Kirghiz, and tell them any lie you want to about their goddess.”

Yogok glared angrily at Gordon. The American’s eyes were bloodshot, the skin stretched taut over the bones of his face. He looked like a man who had been sweated in hell’s fires, and he felt the same way. There was no reason for Yogok’s strident objections, except a desire to get out of the company of those he hated as quickly as possible.

In Gordon’s state a man reverts to primitive instincts, and the American held his thrumming nerves in an iron grip to keep from braining the priest with his gun butt. Dispute and importunities were like screaming insults to his struggling brain.

While the priest squawked, and Gordon hesitated between reasoning with him or knocking him down, the Turkomans, inspired by the gold and food, and eager for the trail, began to crowd past

him. Half a dozen had emerged on the ledge when Gordon noticed them, and ordering Orkhan to bring Yogok along, he rode past those on the ledge, intending to take the lead as usual. But one of the men was already out to the path, and could neither turn back nor hug the wall close enough to let Gordon by.

The American, perforce, called to him to go ahead, and he would follow, and even as Gordon set his horse to the trail a volley of boulders came thundering down from above. They hit the wretched Turkoman and swept him and his horse off the trail as a broom sweeps a spider from a wall. One of the stones, bouncing from the ledge, hit Gordon's horse and broke its leg, and the beast screamed and toppled over the side after the other.

Gordon threw himself clear as it fell, landed half over the edge, and clawed a desperate way to safety with Yasmeena's screams and the yells of the Turkomans ringing in his ears. There was nothing seen to shoot at, but some of them loosed their rifles anyway, and the volley was greeted by a wild peal of mocking laughter from the cliffs above.

In no way unnerved by his narrow escape, Gordon drove his men back into the shelter of the cave. They were like wolves in a trap, ready to strike blind right and left, and a dozen tulwars hovered over Yogok's head.

"Slay him! He has led us into a trap! Allah!"

Yogok's face was a green, convulsed mask of fear. He squalled like a tortured cat.

"Nay! I led you swift and sure! The Kirghiz could not have reached this side of the mountain by this time!"

"Were there monks hiding in these cells?" asked Gordon. "They could have sneaked out when they saw us coming in. Is that a monk up there?"

"Nay; as Erlik is my witness! We work the gold three moons in the years; at other times it is death to go near Mount Erlik. I know not who it is."

Gordon ventured out on the path again and was greeted by another shower of stones, which he barely avoided, and a voice yelled high above him:

"You Yankee dog, how do you like that? I've got you now, damn you! Thought I was done for when I fell into that fissure, didn't you? Well, there was a ledge a few feet down that I landed on. You couldn't see it because the sun wasn't high enough to shine down into it. If I'd had a gun I'd have killed you when you looked down. I climbed out after you left."

"Ormond!" snarled Gordon.

"Did you think I hadn't wormed anything out of that monk?" the Englishman yelled. "He told me all about the paths and Mount Erlik after I'd caved in some of his teeth with a gun barrel. I saw old Yogok with you and knew he'd lead you to Erlik. I got here first. I'd have barred the door and locked you out to be butchered by the fellows who're chasing you, but I couldn't lift the bars. But, anyway, I've got you trapped. You can't leave the cave; if you do I'll mash you like insects on the path. I can see you on it, and you can't see me. I'm going to keep you here until the Kirghiz come up. I've still got Yasmeena's symbol. They'll listen to me.

"I'll tell them Yogok is helping you to kidnap her; they'll kill you all except her. They'll take her back, but I don't care now. I don't need that Kashmiri's money. I've got the secret of Mount Erlik Khan!"

Gordon fell back into the doorway and repeated what the Englishman had said. Yogok turned a shade greener in his fear, and all stared silently at El Borak. His bloodshot gaze traveled over them as they stood blinking, disheveled, and haggard, with lamps paled by the dawn, like ghouls caught above earth by daybreak. Grimly he marshaled his straying wits. Gordon had never reached the ultimate limits of his endurance; always he had plumbed a deeper, hidden reservoir of vitality below what seemed the last.

“Is there another way out of here?” he demanded.

Yogok shook his head, chatting again with terror. “No way that men and horses can go.”

“What do you mean?”

The priest moved back into the darkness and held a lamp close to the flank of the wall where the tunnel narrowed for the entrance. Rusty bits of metal jutted from the rock.

“Here was once a ladder,” he said. “It led far up to a crevice in the wall where long ago one sat to watch the southern pass for invaders. But none has climbed it for many years, and the handholds are rusty and rotten. The crevice opens on the sheer of the outer cliffs, and even if a man reached it, he could scarcely climb down the outside.

“Well, maybe I can pick Ormond off from the crevice,” muttered Gordon, his head swimming with the effort of thinking.

Standing still was making infinitely harder his fight to keep awake. The muttering of the Turkomans was a meaningless tangle of sound, and Yasmeena’s dark anxious eyes seemed to be looking at him from a vast distance. He thought he felt her arms cling to him briefly, but he could not be sure. The lights were beginning to swim in a thick mist.

Beating himself into wakefulness by striking his own face with his open hand, he began the climb, a rifle slung to his back. Orkhan was plucking at him, begging to be allowed to make the attempt in his stead, but Gordon shook him off. In his dazed brain was a conviction that the responsibility was his own. He went up like an automaton, slowly, all his muddled faculties concentrating grimly on the task.

Fifty feet up, the light of the lamps ceased to aid him, and he groped upward in the gloom, feeling for the rusty bolts set in the wall. They were so rotten that he dared not put his full weight on any one of them. In some places they were missing and he clung with his fingers in the niches where they had been. Only the slant of the rock enabled him to accomplish the climb at all, and it seemed endless, a hell-born eternity of torture.

The lamps below him were like fireflies in the darkness, and the roof with its clustering stalactites was only a few yards above his head. Then he saw a gleam of light, and an instant later he was crouching in a cleft that opened on the outer air. It was only a couple of yards wide, and not tall enough for a man to stand upright.

He crawled along it for some thirty feet and then looked out on a rugged slant that pitched down to a crest of cliffs, a hundred feet below. He could not see the ledge where the door opened, nor the

path that led from it, but he saw a figure crouching among the boulders along the lip of the cliff, and he unslung his rifle.

Ordinarily he could not have missed at that range. But his bloodshot eyes refused to line the sights. Slumber never assails a weary man so fiercely as in the growing light of dawn. The figure among the rocks below merged and blended fantastically with the scenery, and the sights of the rifle were mere blurs.

Setting his teeth, Gordon pulled the trigger, and the bullet smashed on the rock a foot from Ormond's head. The Englishman dived out of sight among the boulders without pausing to find where the shot came from.

In desperation Gordon slung his rifle and threw a leg over the lip of the cleft. He was certain that Ormond had no firearm. Down below the Turkomans were clamoring like a wolf pack, but his numbed faculties were fully occupied with the task of climbing down the ribbed pitch. He stumbled and fumbled and nearly fell, and at last he did slip and came sliding and tumbling down until his rifle caught on a projection and held him dangling by the strap.

In a red mist he saw Ormond break cover, with a tulwar that he must have found in the cavern, and in a panic lest the Englishman climb up and kill him as he hung helplessly, Gordon braced his feet and elbows against the rock and wrenched savagely, breaking the rifle strap. He plunged down like a plummet, hit the slope, clawed at rocks and knobs, and brought up on shelving stone a dozen feet from the cliff edge, while his rifle, tumbling before him, slid over and was gone.

The fall jolted his numbed nerves back into life again, knocked some of the cobwebs out of his dizzy brain. Ormond was within a few steps of him when he scrambled up, drawing his scimitar. The Englishman was as savage and haggard in appearance as was Gordon, and his eyes blazed with a frenzy that almost amounted to madness.

"Steel to steel now, El Borak!" Ormond gritted. "We'll see if you're the swordsman they say you are!"

Ormond came with a rush and Gordon met him, fired above his exhaustion by his hate and the stinging frenzy of battle. They fought back and forth along the cliff edge, with a foot to spare between them and eternity sometimes, until the clangor of the swords wakened the eagles to shrill hysteria.

Ormond fought like a wild man, yet with all the craft the sword masters of his native England had taught him. Gordon fought as he had learned to fight in grim and merciless battles in the hills and the steppes and the deserts. He fought as an Afghan fights, with the furious intensity of onslaught that gathers force like a rising hurricane as it progresses.

Beating on his blade like a smith on an anvil, Gordon drove the Englishman staggering before him, until the man swayed dizzily with his heels over the edge of the cliff.

“Swine!” gasped Ormond with his last breath, and spat in his enemy’s face and slashed madly at his head.

“This for Ahmed!” roared Gordon, and his scimitar whirled past Ormond’s blade and crunched home.

The Englishman reeled outward, his features suddenly blotted out by blood and brains, and pitched backward into the gulf without a sound.

Gordon sat down on a boulder, suddenly aware of the quivering of his leg muscles. He sat there, his gory blade across his knees and his head sunk in his hands, his brain a black blank, until shouts welling up from below roused him to consciousness.

“Ohai, El Borak! A man with a cleft head has fallen past us into the valley! Art thou safe? We await orders!”

He lifted his head and glanced at the sun which was just rising over the eastern peaks, turning to crimson flame the snow of Mount Erlik Khan. He would have traded all the gold of the monks of Yolgan to be allowed to lie down and sleep for an hour, and climbing up on his stiffened legs that trembled with his weight was a task of appalling magnitude. But his labor was not yet done; there was no rest for him this side the pass.

Summoning the shreds of his strength, he shouted down to the raiders.

“Get upon the horses and ride, sons of nameless dogs! Follow the trail and I will come along the cliff. I see a place beyond the next bend where I can climb down to the trail. Bring Yogok with you; he has earned his release but the time is not yet.”

“Hurry, El Borak,” floated up Yasmeena’s golden call. “It is far to Delhi, and many mountains lie between!”

Gordon laughed and sheathed his scimitar, and his laugh sounded like the ghastly mirth of a hyena; the Turkomans had taken the road and were already singing a chant improvised in his honor, naming “Son of the Sword” the man who staggered along the cliffs above them, with a face like a grinning skull and feet that left smears of blood on the rock.

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Three Bladed Doom

I

Knives in the Dark

It was the scruff of swift and stealthy feet in the darkened doorway he had just passed that warned Gordon. He wheeled with catlike quickness just in time to see a tall figure lunge at him from that black arch. It was dark in the narrow, alley-like street, but Gordon glimpsed a fierce bearded face, the gleam of steel in the lifted hand, even as he avoided the blow with a twist of his whole body. The knife ripped his shirt and before the attacker could recover his balance, the American caught his arm and crashed the long barrel of his heavy pistol down on the fellow's head. The man crumpled to the earth without a sound.

Gordon stood above him, listening with tense expectancy. Up the street, around the next corner, he heard the shuffle of sandalled feet, the muffled clink of steel. They told him the nighted streets of Kabul were a death-trap for Francis Xavier Gordon. He hesitated, half

lifting the big gun, then shrugged his shoulders and hurried down the street, swerving wide of the dark arches that gaped in the walls which lined it. He turned into another, wider street, and a few moments later rapped softly on a door above which burned a brass lantern.

The door opened almost instantly and Gordon stepped quickly inside.

"Lock the door!"

The tall bearded Afridi who had admitted the American shot home the heavy bolt, and turned, tugging his beard perturbedly as he inspected his friend.

"Your shirt is gashed, El Borak!" he rumbled.

"A man tried to knife me," answered Gordon. "Others followed me."

The Afridi's fierce eyes blazed and he laid a sinewy hand on the three-foot Khyber knife that jutted from his hip.

"Let us sally forth and slay the dogs, *sahib*!" he urged.

Gordon shook his head. He was not a large man, but his appearance was impressive. Thick chest, corded neck and square shoulders presented a compactness which hinted at almost primordial strength and endurance, and he moved with a supple ease that betrayed capabilities for blinding quickness.

"Let them go. They're the enemies of Baber Khan, who knew that I went to the Amir tonight to urge him to pardon the man."

"And what said the Amir?"

"He's determined on Baber Khan's destruction. The chief's enemies have poisoned the Amir against him, and then Baber Khan's stubborn. He's refused to come to Kabul and answer charges of sedition. The Amir swears he'll march within the week and lay Khor in ashes and take Baber Khan's head, unless the chief comes in voluntarily and surrenders. Baber Khan's enemies don't want him to do that. They know the charges they've made against him wouldn't

stand up, with me defending his case. That's why they're trying to put me out of the way, but they don't dare strike openly.

"I'm going to see if I can't persuade Baber Khan to come in and surrender."

"That the chief of Khor will never do," predicted the Afridi.

"Probably not, but I'm going to try. Baber Khan is my friend. Wake Ahmed Shah and get the horses ready while I throw a pack together. We're starting for Khor right away."

The Afridi did not comment on night-travel in the Hills, or mention the lateness of the hour. Men who rode with El Borak were accustomed to hard riding at all ungodly hours.

"What of the Sikh?" he asked as he turned away.

"He remains at the palace. The Amir trusts Lal Singh more than his own guards, and wants to keep him as a body-guard for awhile. He's been nervous ever since the Sultan of Turkey was murdered by that fanatic. Hasten, Yar Ali Khan. Baber Khan's enemies are probably watching the house, but they don't know about that door that lets into the alley behind the stables. We'll slip out that way."

The huge Afridi strode into an inner chamber and shook the man sleeping there on a heap of carpets.

"Awaken, son of *Shaitan*. We ride westward."

Ahmed Shah, a stocky Yusufzai, sat up, yawning.

"Where?"

"To the Ghilzai village of Khor, where the rebel dog Baber Khan will doubtless cut out all our hearts," growled Yar Ali Khan.

Ahmed Shah grinned broadly as he rose.

"You have no love for the Ghilzai; but he is El Borak's friend."

Yar Ali Khan scowled and muttered direly in his beard as he stalked out into the inner courtyard and headed for the stables. These lay within the high enclosure, and no one but the members of Gordon's "family" knew that a hidden door connected them with an outer alley. So all the shadowy figures that lurked about his house

that night were watching the other sides when the small party moved stealthily down the black alley. Within half an hour from the time Gordon rapped at his door, the clink of hoofs on the rocky road beyond the city wall marked the passing of three men who rode swiftly westward.

Meanwhile in the palace the Amir of Afghanistan was proving the adage concerning the uneasiness of the head that wears the crown.

He emerged from an inner chamber, wearing a pre-occupied expression, and absently returned the salute of a tall, magnificently-shouldered Sikh who clicked his booted heels and came to military attention. The Amir turned up the corridor, indicating with a gesture that he wished to be alone, so Lal Singh saluted again and fell back, resuming his station by the door, one hand absently caressing the sharkskin-bound hilt of his long saber.

His dark eyes followed the Amir up the corridor. He knew that his friend El Borak had been closeted with the king for several hours, and had left with an abruptness that hinted at anger.

This interview was likewise on the Amir's mind as he entered a large lamp-lit chamber and crossed toward a gold-barred window that overlooked the sleeping city. It was the first rift in his relationship with the American, who acted as unofficial advisor, counsel, ambassador and secret service department. Hedged in by powerful nations which used his mountain kingdom as a pawn in their game of empire, the Amir leaned heavily on the western adventurer who had proved his reliability scores of times.

The Amir frowned, from his troubled spirit, glancing idly at a curtain which masked an alcove and absently reflecting that the wind must be rising, since the tapestry swayed lightly. He glanced at the gold-barred window and instantly went cold. The light curtains there hung motionless. Yet the hangings over the alcove had stirred —

The Amir was a powerful man, with plenty of personal courage. Almost instinctively he sprang, seized the tapestries and tore them apart — a dagger in a dark hand licked from between them and

smote him full in the breast. He cried out as he went down, dragging his assailant with him. The man snarled like a wild beast, his dilated eyes glaring madly. His dagger ribboned the Amir's *khalat*, revealing the mail shirt which had saved the ruler's life more than once.

Outside a deep shout echoed the Amir's lusty yell for help, and booted feet pounded down the corridor. The Amir had grasped his attacker by the throat and the knife-wrist, but the man's stringy muscles were like knots of steel. As they rolled on the floor the dagger, glancing from the mail shirt, fleshed itself in arm, thigh and hand. Then, as the bravo heaved the weakening ruler under him, grasped his throat and lifted the knife again, something flashed in the lamp-light like a jet of blue lightning, and the murderer collapsed, split to the teeth.

"Your majesty — my lord — !" The Sikh was pale under his black beard. "Are you slain? Nay, you bleed! Wait!"

He thrust the corpse aside and lifted the Amir. The ruler was gasping for breath and covered with blood, his own and his attacker's. He sank on a divan, and the Sikh began to rip strips of silk from the hangings to bind his wounds.

"Look!" the Amir gasped, pointing. His face was livid, his hand shook. "The knife! The knife!"

It lay glinting dully by the dead man's hand — a curious weapon with *three* blades sprouting from the same hilt. Lal Singh started and swore beneath his breath.

"The Triple-Bladed Dagger!" panted the Amir, fear flooding his eyes. "The kind of knife that slew the Sultan of Turkey! The Shah of Persia! The Nizam of Hyderabad!"

"The mark of the Hidden Ones!" muttered Lal Singh, uneasily eyeing the ominous symbol of the terrible cult which within the past year had struck again and again at the men occupying the high places of the east.

The noise had roused the palace; men were running down the corridors, shouting to know what had occurred.

“Shut the door!” exclaimed the Amir. “Admit no one but the major domo of the palace.”

“But we must have a physician, your majesty,” protested the Sikh. “These wounds will not slay of themselves, but the dagger might have been poisoned.”

“Then send someone for a *hakim. Ya Allah!* The Hidden Ones have marked me for doom!” The Amir was a brave man, but his experience had shaken him terribly. “Who can fight the dagger in the dark, the serpent underfoot, the poison in the wine-cup?

“Lal Singh, go swiftly to El Borak’s house and tell him I have desperate need of him! Bring him to me! If there is one man in Afghanistan who can protect me from these hidden devils, it is he!”

Lal Singh saluted and hurried from the chamber, shaking his head at the sight of fear in the countenance where fear had never before showed.

There was cause for the Amir’s fear. A strange and terrible cult had risen in the East. Who they were, what their ultimate purpose was, none knew. They were called the Hidden Ones and they slew with a three-bladed dagger. That was all that was known about them. Their agents appeared suddenly, struck and disappeared, or else were slain, refusing to be taken alive. Some considered them to be merely religious fanatics. Others believed their activities to possess a political significance. Lal Singh knew that not even Gordon had any definite information about them. But he was confident of the American’s ability to protect the Amir, even from these subtle fiends.

Three days after his hurried departure from Kabul, Gordon sat cross-legged in the trail where it looped over the rock ridge to follow the slope down to Khor village.

“I stand between you and death!” he warned the man who sat opposite him.

This man tugged his purple-stained beard reflectively. He was broad and powerful and his Bokhariot girdle bristled with dagger hilts. And he was Baber Khan, chief of the fierce Ghilzai, and absolute overlord of Khor and its three hundred wild swordsmen.

But there was no hint of arrogance in his answer.

“Allah favor thee! Yet what man can pass the spot of his death?”

“I offer you an opportunity to make your peace with the Amir.”

Baber Khan shook his head with the fatalism of his race.

“I have too many enemies at the royal court. If I went to Kabul the Amir would listen to their lies. He would set me on a stake, or hang me up in an iron cage for the kites to eat. Nay, I will not go!”

“Then take your people and find another abode. There are places in these Hills where not even the Amir could follow you.”

Baber Khan glanced down the rocky slope to the cluster of mud-and-stone towers that rose above the encircling wall of the same substance. His thin nostrils expanded and into his eyes came a dark flame like that of an eagle which surveys its aerie.

“Nay, by Allah! My clan has held Khor since the days of Akbar. Let the Amir rule in Kabul. This is *mine!*”

“The Amir will likewise rule in Khor,” grunted Yar Ali Khan, squatting behind Gordon, with Ahmed Shah.

Baber Khan glanced in the other direction where the trail disappeared to the east between jutting crags. On these crags bits of white cloth were blown out on the sharp wind, which the watchers knew were the garments of the riflemen who guarded the pass day and night.

“Let him come,” said Baber Khan grimly. “We hold the valley.”

“He’ll bring five thousand men, with artillery,” warned Gordon. “He’ll burn Khor and take your head back to Kabul.”

“*Inshallah,*” agreed Baber Khan placidly, indomitably fatalistic.

As so often in the past Gordon fought down a rising anger at this invincible Oriental characteristic. Every instinct of his strenuous nature was a negation of this inert philosophy. But just now the matter seemed at a dead-lock, and he said nothing, but sat staring at the western crags where the sun hung, a ball of fire in the sharp windy blue.

Baber Khan, supposing that Gordon’s silence signified recognition of defeat, dismissed the matter with a casual wave, and said: “*Sahib*, there is something I desire to show you. Down in yonder ruined hut which stands outside the village wall, there lies a dead man, the like of which was never seen by me or any other man of Khor. Even in death he is strange and evil, and I think he is no natural man at all, but a—”

The sharp spang of a rifle-shot echoed among the crags to the east, and instantly all four men were on their feet, facing that way.

A shift in the wind brought the sound of angry shouting to them. Then a figure appeared on the cliffs, leaping agilely from ledge to ledge. He danced like a mountain devil, brandishing his rifle; his ragged cloak whipped out on the wind.

"*Ohai*, Baber Khan!" he yelled, straining above the gusts. "A Sikh on a foundered horse is beyond the pass! He demands speech with the lord El Borak!"

"A Sikh?" snapped Gordon, stiffening. "Let him in, at once!"

Baber Khan relayed the command in a bellow that vibrated among the cliffs, and the man swarmed back up the ledges. Presently a man appeared in the pass on a horse which seemed ready to drop at each step. Its head dropped and its coat was plastered with foam and sweat.

#x201C;Lal Singh!" ejaculated Gordon.

"By Krishna, *sahib,*" the Sikh grimaced as he slid stiffly to the ground. "Well are you named El Borak the Swift! I do not think you were more than an hour ahead of me when I rode through the Kabul gate, but strive as I would, on a fresh horse seized at every village I passed, I could not overtake you."

"Your news must be urgent, Lal Singh."

"It is, *sahib,*" the Sikh assured him. "The Amir sent me after you to beg you to return instantly to Kabul. *Sahib*, the Triple-Bladed Dagger has struck at the Amir!"

Gordon's hard body tensed like that of a panther that scents peril. "Tell me about it!" he commanded, and in a few terse words Lal Singh told of the attack on the Amir.

"At your quarters I learned you had departed for Khor," said Lal Singh. "I returned to the palace and the Amir urged me to follow you and bring you back. He was sick of his wounds, and nearly dead with terror."

Gordon asked: “Did he say anything about the expedition he planned to lead against Khor?”

“Nay, *sahib*. But I think he will not leave the palace until you return. Certainly not until his wounds heal, if indeed he does not die of the poison with which the dagger blades were smeared.”

“You have received a reprieve of Fate,” said Gordon to Baber Khan, and to Lal Singh he said: “Come down to the village, eat and sleep. We’ll start for Kabul at dawn.”

As the five men started down the slope, with the weary horse plodding behind them, Baber Khan glanced at Gordon, and asked: “What is your thought, El Borak?”

“That somebody’s pulling strings in Constantinople, or in Moscow, or in Berlin,” answered the American.

“So? I deemed these Hidden Ones mere fanatics.”

“More than that, I fear,” said Gordon. “Apparently it’s a secret society with anarchistic principles. But I’ve noticed that every ruler who’s been killed or attacked has been an ally or a friend of the British empire. So I believe some European power is behind them.

“But what were you going to show me?”

“A corpse in a broken hut!” Baber Khan turned aside and led them toward the hovel. “My warriors came upon him lying at the base of a cliff from which he had fallen or been thrown. I made them bring him here, but he died on the way, babbling in a strange tongue. My people feared it would bring a curse on the village. They deem him a magician or a devil, and with good cause.

“A long day’s journey southward, among mountains so wild and barren not even a Pathan could dwell among them, lies a country we call *Ghulistan.*”

“*Ghulistan!*” Gordon echoed the sinister phrase. “In Turkish or Tatar that means Land of Roses, but in Arabic it means The Country of the Ghouls.”

“Aye, the Land of *Ghuls;* an evil region of black crags and wild gorges, shunned by wise men. It seems uninhabited, yet men dwell

there — men or demons. Sometimes a man is slain or a woman or child stolen from a lonely trail, and we know it is their work. We have followed, have glimpsed shadowy figures moving through the night, but always the trail ends against a blank cliff through which only a demon could pass. Sometimes we have heard the voice of the *djinn* echoing among the crags. It is a sound to turn men's hearts to ice."

They had reached the ruined hut, and Baber Khan pulled open the sagging door. A moment later the five men were bending over a figure which sprawled on the dirt floor.

It was a figure alien and incongruous; that of a short, squat man, with broad, square, flat features, colored like dark copper, and narrow slant eyes — an unmistakable son of the Gobi. Blood clotted the thick black hair on the back of his head, and the unnatural position of his body told of broken bones.

"Has he not the look of a magician?" said Baber Khan uneasily.

"He's a Mongol," answered Gordon. "There are thousands like him in the land from which he came, far to the east, and they're no magicians. But what he was doing here is more than I can say —"

Suddenly his black eyes blazed, and he snatched and tore the bloodstained *khalat* away from the squat throat. A stained woolen shirt came into view, and Yar Ali Khan, looking over Gordon's shoulder, grunted explosively. On the shirt, worked in thread so crimson it might at first glance have been mistaken for a splash of blood, appeared a curious emblem: a human fist grasping a hilt from which jutted three double-edged blades.

"The Triple-Bladed Knife!" whispered Baber Khan, recoiling from that dread symbol which had come to embody a harbinger of death and destruction to the rulers of the East.

All looked at Gordon, but he said nothing. He stared down at the sinister emblem trying to capture a vague train of associations it roused — dim memories of an ancient and evil cult which used that same symbol, long ago.

“Can you have your men guide me to the spot where you found this man, Baber Khan?” he asked at last.

“Aye, *sahib*. But it is an evil place. It is in the Gorge of Ghosts, close to the borders of *Ghulistan*, and —”

“Good. Lal Singh, you and the others go and sleep. We ride at dawn.”

“To Kabul, *sahib?*”

“No. To *Ghulistan.*”

“Then you think —”

“I think nothing — yet; I go in search of knowledge.”

II
The Black Country

Dusk was mantling the jumbled sky-line when Gordon’s Ghilzai guide halted. Ahead of them the rugged terrain was broken by a deep canyon and beyond the canyon rose a forbidding array of black crags and frowning cliffs. The change from grey shale, brown slopes and reddish stone was abrupt, as if the canyon marked a distinct geographical division. Beyond the gorge there was nothing to be seen except a wild, hag-like chaos of broken black rock.

“There begins *Ghulistan,*” said the Ghilzai, and his hawk-eyed, hook-nosed comrades instinctively loosened their knives and clicked the bolts of their rifles. “Beyond that gorge, the Gorge of Ghosts, begins the country of horror and death. We go no further, *sahib.*”

Gordon nodded, his keen gaze picking out a trail that looped down rugged slopes into the canyon. It was the fading trace of an ancient road they had been following for many miles, but it looked as if it had been used frequently, and lately.

The Ghilzai nodded, divining his thought.

“That trail is well-traveled. By it the demons of the black mountains come and go. But men who follow it will not return.”

Yar Ali Khan tugged his beard truculently and jeered, though he secretly shared their superstitions. “Demons? What need demons with a trail?”

“When demons take the shape of men they might walk like men,” Ahmed Shah grunted in his bushy beard. Lal Singh the Sikh was imperturbable. His own mythology was full of myriad-limbed demons, but he had scant respect for the superstitions of other races.

“Demons fly with wings like a bat!” asserted Yar Ali Khan.

The Ghilzai decided to ignore the Afridi, and pointed to the jutting ledge over which the trail wound.

“At the foot of that slope we found the man you called a Mongol. Doubtless his brother demons quarreled with him and cast him down.”

“Doubtless he tripped and fell and rolled off the trail,” grunted Gordon. “Mongols are desert men. They are unused to mountain climbing, and their legs are bowed and weakened by a life in the saddle. Such a one would stumble easily on a narrow trail.”

“If he was a man, perhaps,” conceded the Ghilzai. “I still say — *Allah!*”

All started except Gordon, and the Ghilzais turned pale and threw up their rifles, glaring like startled wolves. Out over the crags, from the south, rolled a strange sound of peculiar resonance and stridency — a harsh, braying roar that vibrated among the mountains.

“The voice of the *djinn!*” ejaculated the Ghilzai, unconsciously jerking the rein of his horse so the brute squealed and reared. “*Sahib*, in the name of Allah the Compassionate, be wise! Return with us to Khor!”

“Go back to your village. That was the agreement. I am going on.”

“Baber Khan will weep for thee!” the leader of the band yelled reproachfully over his shoulder as he kicked his pony into a wild run. “He loves thee like a brother! There will be woe in Khor! *Aie! Ahai! Ohee!*” His lamentations died away amidst the clatter of hoofs

on stone as the Ghilzais, flogging their ponies hard, topped a ridge and vanished from view.

"Run, sons of noseless dams!" yelled Yar Ali Khan, who never missed an opportunity to vent tribal prejudice and flaunt personal superiority. "We will brand your devils and drag them to Khor by their tails!" But he fell mute the instant the victims were out of hearing.

Gordon and his companions sat their steeds alone on the canyon's rim, staring in the direction from which had come that ominous voice.

Ahmed Shah shifted nervously in his saddle, and Yar Ali Khan tugged his patriarchal beard and eyed Gordon sidewise, like an apprehensive ghoul with a three-foot knife. But El Borak spoke to Lal Singh: "Have you ever heard a sound like that before?"

The tall Sikh nodded.

"Yes, *sahib*, in the mountains of the men who serve the devil."

Gordon lifted his reins without comment. He too had heard the roar of the ten-foot bronze trumpets that blare over the bare black mountains of forbidden Mongolia, in the hands of shaven-headed priests of Erlik.

Yar Ali Khan snorted. He had not heard those trumpets, and he had not been consulted. He was as bellicosely jealous of Gordon's attention as a favorite wolfhound. He thrust his horse in ahead of Lal Singh, so as to be next to Gordon as they rode down the steep slopes in the purple dusk. He bared his teeth at the Sikh who was too much accustomed to such displays of savage vanity to take offense, and said roughly to the man whose friendship he prized above everything else in the world: "Now that we have been lured into this country of devils by treacherous Ghilzai dogs who will undoubtedly steal back and cut the *sahib's* throat while he sleeps, what have you planned for us?"

It might have been a gaunt old wolfhound growling at his master for patting another dog; Gordon bent his head and spat to hide a grin.

“We’ll camp in the canyon tonight. The horses are tired, and there’s no point in struggling through these gulches in the dark. Tomorrow we’ll do some exploring and scouting. There’s no doubt that the Mongol was one of the Hidden Ones. He must have been on foot when he fell. If he’d been on a horse, he wouldn’t have fallen unless the horse fell too. The Ghilzai didn’t find a dead horse. Only a dead man. If he was afoot, it’s certain that he wasn’t far from some camp or rendezvous. A Mongol wouldn’t walk far; wouldn’t walk a hundred feet unless he had to, in fact.

“The more I think of it the more it seems to me that the Hidden Ones have a rendezvous somewhere in that country across the gorge. It could make a perfect hide-out. The Hills in this particular corner of the globe aren’t thickly inhabited. Khor is the nearest village, and it’s a long day’s hard ride, as we’ve found. Wandering clans stay out of these parts, fearing the Ghilzais, and Baber Khan’s men are too superstitious to investigate much across that gorge. The Hidden Ones, hiding over there somewhere, could come and go pretty much undetected. That old road we’ve been following most of the day used to be a main caravan route, centuries ago, and it’s still practicable for men on horses. Better still, it doesn’t pass near any villages, and isn’t used by the tribes now. Men following it could get to within a day’s ride of Kabul without much fear of being seen by anyone. I remember seeing it on old maps, drawn on parchment, centuries ago.

“Frankly, I don’t know what we’ll do. Mainly we’ll keep our eyes open and await developments. Our actions will depend on circumstances. Our destiny,” said Gordon without cynicism, “is on Allah’s knees.”

“*La illaha illulah; Muhammad rassoul ullah!*” agreed Yar Ali Khan sonorously, stroking his beard like a reverent cut-throat, completely mollified.

As they came down into the canyon they saw that the trail led across the rock-strewn floor and into the mouth of a deep, narrow gorge which debouched into the canyon from the south. The south wall of the canyon was higher than the north wall, and much more

sheer; it swept up like a sullen rampart of solid black rock, broken at intervals by narrow cleft-like gorge-mouths. Gordon rode into the gorge in which the trail wound and followed it to the first bend, finding that bend was but the first of a succession of kinks. The ravine, running between sheer walls of rock, writhed and twisted like the track of a serpent and was already filled to the brim with darkness.

"This is our road, tomorrow," said Gordon, and his men nodded silently, as he led them back to the main canyon, where some light still lingered, ghostly in the thickening dusk. The clang of their horses' hoofs on the flint seemed startlingly loud in the sullen, brutish silence.

A few hundred feet west of the trail-ravine another, narrower one opened into the canyon. Its rock floor showed no sign of any trail, and it narrowed so rapidly that Gordon was inclined to believe it ended in a blind alley.

About half-way between these ravine mouths, but near the north wall, which was at that point precipitous, a tiny spring bubbled up in a natural basin of age-hollowed rock. Behind it, in a cave-like niche in the cliff, dry wiry grass grew sparsely, and there they tethered the weary horses. They camped at the spring, eating from tins, not risking a fire which might be seen from afar by hostile eyes — though they realized that there was a chance that they had been seen by hidden watchers already. There is always that chance in the Hills. The tents had been left in Khor. Blankets spread on the ground were luxuries enough for Gordon and his hardy followers.

His position seemed a strategic one. The party could not be attacked from the north, because of the sheer cliffs; no one could reach the horses without first passing through the camp. Gordon made provision against surprize from the south, or from east or west.

He divided his party into two watches. Lal Singh he placed on guard west of the camp, near the mouth of the narrower ravine, and Ahmed Shah had his station close to the mouth of the eastern

ravine, up which, it was logical to suppose, peril was most likely to come. Ahmed Shah had that post instead of Lal Singh (who could have bested him in any sort of a battle) because his external senses were a shade more acute than the Sikh's; the senses of any savage being naturally keener than the specially-trained faculties of a civilized man, however intensely cultivated.

Any hostile band coming up or down the canyon, or entering it from either ravine, would have to pass these sentries, whose vigilance Gordon had proven many times in the past. Later in the night he and Yar Ali Khan would take their places.

Darkness came swiftly in the canyon, seeming to flow in almost tangible waves down the black slopes, and ooze out of the blacker mouths of the ravines. Stars blinked out, cold, white and impersonal. Above the invaders brooded the great dusky bulks of the broken mountains, brutish, primordial. As Gordon fell asleep he was wondering what grim spectacles they had witnessed since the beginning of Time, and what inhuman creatures had crept through them before Man was.

Primitive instincts, slumbering in the average man, are whetted to razor-edge by a life of constant hazard. Gordon awoke the instant Yar Ali Khan touched him, and at once, before the Afridi spoke, the American knew that peril was in the air. The tense grasp on his shoulder spoke plainly to him of imminent danger.

He came up on one knee instantly, gun in hand.

"What is it?"

Yar Ali Khan crouched be side him, gigantic shoulders bulking dimly in the gloom. The Afridi's eyes glimmered like a cat's in the dark. Back in the shadow of the cliffs the unseen horses moved restively, the only sound in the nighted canyon.

"Danger, *sahib!*" hissed the Afridi. "Close about us, creeping upon us in the dark! *Ahmed Shah is slain!*"

“What?”

“He lies near the mouth of the ravine with his throat cut from ear to ear. I dreamed that death was stealing upon us as we slept, and the fear of the dream awoke me. Without rousing you I stole to the mouth of the eastern ravine, and lo, there lay Ahmed Shah in his blood. He must have died silently and suddenly. I saw no one, heard no sound in the ravine, which was as black as the mouth of hell.

“Then I hurried along the south wall to the western ravine, and found no one! I speak truth, Allah be my witness. Ahmed is dead and Lal Singh is gone. The devils of the hills have slain one and snatched away the other, without waking us — we who sleep lightly as cats! No sound came from the ravine before which the Sikh had had his post. I saw nothing, heard nothing; but I *sensed* Death skulking there, with red eyes of awful hunger and fingers that dripped blood. *Sahib*, what *men* could have done away with such warriors as the Sikh and Ahmed Shah without a sound? This gorge is indeed the Gorge of Ghosts!”

Gordon made no reply, but crouched on his knee, straining eyes and ears into the darkness, while he considered the astounding thing that had occurred. It did not occur to him to doubt the Afridi’s statements. He could trust the man as he trusted his own eyes and ears. That Yar Ali Khan could have stolen away without awakening even him was not surprizing, for the Afridi was of that breed of men who glide naked through the mists to steal rifles from the guarded tents of English soldiers. But that Ahmed Shah should have died and that Lal Singh been spirited away without the sound of a struggle was incredible. It smacked of the diabolical.

“Who can fight devils, *sahib*? Let us mount the horses and ride —”

“Listen!”

Somewhere a bare foot scruffed on the rock floor. Gordon rose, peering into the gloom. Men were moving out there in the darkness. Shadows detached themselves from the black background and slunk forward. Gordon drew the scimitar he had buckled on at Khor, thrusting his pistol back into its scabbard. Lal Singh was a captive

out there, probably in the line of fire. Yar Ali Khan crouched beside him, gripping his Khyber knife, silent now, and deadly as a wolf at bay, convinced that they were facing ghoulish fiends of the dark mountains, but ready to fight men or devils, if Gordon so willed it.

The dim-seen line moved in slowly, widening as it came, and Gordon and the Afridi fell back a few paces to have the rock wall at their back, and prevent themselves from being surrounded by those phantom-like figures.

The rush came suddenly, impetuously, bare feet slapping softly over the rocky floor, steel glinting dully in the dim starlight. Gordon could see like a cat in the dark, and Yar Ali Khan's eyes were such as can be possessed only by a man bred in the abysmal blackness of the Hills. Even so they could make out few details of their assailants — only the bulks of them, and the shimmer of steel. They struck and parried by instinct and feel as much as by sight.

Gordon killed the first man to come within sword-reach, and Yar Ali Khan, galvanized by the realization that their foes were human after all, sounded a deep yell and exploded in a berserk burst of wolfish ferocity. Towering above the squat figures, his three-foot knife overreached the blades that hacked at him, and its edge bit deep. Standing side by side, with the wall at their backs, the two companions were safe from attack from the rear or flank. Steel rang sharply on steel and blue sparks flew, momentarily lighting wild bearded faces. There rose the ugly butcher-shop sound of keen blades cleaving flesh and bone, and men screamed or gasped death-gurgles from severed jugulars. For a few moments a huddled knot writhed and contorted near the rock wall. The work was too swift and desperate and blind to allow much consecutive thought or plan. But the advantage was with the men at bay. They could see as well as their attackers; man for man, they were stronger and more agile; and they knew when they struck their steel would flesh itself only in enemies. The others were handicapped by their numbers and the darkness, and the knowledge that they might kill a companion with a blind stroke must surely have tempered their frenzy.

Gordon, ducking a sword before he realized he had seen it swinging at him, found time for an instant of surprize. Thrice his blade had grated against something yielding but impenetrable. These men were wearing shirts of mail! He slashed where he knew unprotected thighs and heads and necks would be, and men spurted their blood on him as they died.

Then the rush ebbed as suddenly as it had flooded. The attackers gave way and melted like phantoms into the darkness. That darkness had become not quite so absolute. The eastern rims of the canyon were lined with a silvery fire that marked the rising of the moon.

Yar Ali Khan gave tongue like a wolf and charged after the dim, retreating figures, foam of aroused blood-lust flecking his beard. He stumbled over a corpse, stabbed savagely downward before he realized it was a dead man, and then Gordon grabbed his arm and jerked him to a halt. He almost dragged the powerful American off his feet, as he plunged like a lassoed bull, breathing gustily.

“Wait, you idiot! Do you want to run into a trap? Let them go!”

Yar Ali Khan subsided to a wolfish wariness that was no less deadly than his berserk fury, and together they glided cautiously after the vague figures which disappeared in the mouth of the eastern ravine. There the pursuers halted, peering warily into the black depths. Somewhere, far down it, a dislodged pebble rattled on the stone, and both men tensed involuntarily, reacting like suspicious panthers.

“The dogs did not halt,” muttered Yar Ali Khan. “They flee still. Shall we follow them?”

He did not speak with conviction, and Gordon merely shook his head. Not even they dared plunge into that well of blackness, where ambushes might make every step a march of death. They fell back to the camp and the fear-maddened horses, which were frantic with the stench of fresh-spilt blood.

“When the moon rises high enough to flood the canyon with light,” quoth Yar Ali Khan, “they will shoot us from the ravine.”

“That’s a chance we must take,” grunted Gordon. “Maybe they’re not good shots.”

With the tiny beam of his pocket flashlight Gordon investigated the four dead men left behind by the attackers. The thin pencil of light moved from face to bearded face, and Yar Ali Khan, looking over his shoulder, grunted and swore: “Devil worshippers, by the beard of Allah! Yezidees! Sons of Melek Taus!”

“No wonder they stole through the dark like cats of hell,” muttered Gordon, who well knew the uncanny stealth possessed by the people of that ancient and abominable cult which worships the Brazen Peacock on Mount Lalesh the Accursed.

Yar Ali Khan made a sign calculated to fend off devils which might be expected to be lurking near any place where their votaries had died.

“Come away, *sahib*. It is not fitting that you should touch this carrion. No wonder they slew and stole like the *djinn* of silence. They are children of night and darkness, and they partake of the attributes of the elements which gave them birth.”

“But what are they doing here?” mused Gordon. “Their homeland is in Syria — about Mount Lalesh. It’s the last stronghold of their race, to which they were driven by Christian and Moslem alike. A Mongol from the Gobi, and devil-worshippers from Syria. What’s the connection?”

He grasped the coarse woolen *khalat* of the nearest corpse, and swore down Yar Ali Khan’s instant objections.

“That flesh is accursed,” sulked the Afridi, looking like a scandalized ghoul, with the dripping knife in his hand, and blood trickling down his beard from a broken tooth. “It is not fit for a *sahib* such as thou to handle. If it must be done, let me —”

“Oh, shut up! Ha! Just as I thought!”

The tiny beam rested on the linen jerkin which covered the thick chest of the mountaineer. There gleamed, like a splash of fresh blood, the emblem of a hand gripping a three-bladed dagger.

"*Wallah!*" Discarding his scruples, Yar Ali Khan ripped the *khalats* from the other three corpses. Each displayed the fist and dagger.

"Are Mongols Muhammadans, *sahib?*" he asked presently.

"Some are. But that man in Baber Khan's hut wasn't. His canine teeth were filed to sharp points. He was a devotee of Erlik, the Yellow God of Death. Probably a priest. Cannibalism is an element of some of their rituals."

"The man who killed the Sultan of Turkey was a Kurd," mused Yar Ali Khan. "Some of them worship Melek Taus, too, secretly. But it was an Arab who slew the Shah of Persia, and a Delhi Moslem fired at the Viceroy. What would true Muhammadans be doing in a society which includes Mongol and Yezidee devil-worshippers?"

"That's what we're here to find out," answered Gordon, snapping off the electric torch.

They squatted in the shadow of the cliffs, in silence, as the moonlight, weird and ghostly, grew in the canyon, and rock and ledge and wall took shape. No sound disturbed the brooding quiet.

Yar Ali Khan rose at last and stood up etched in the witch-light glow, a fair target for anyone lurking in the ravine-mouth. But no shot rang out.

"What now?"

Gordon pointed to dark splotches on the bare rock floor that the moonlight made visible and distinct.

"They've left us a trail a child could follow."

Without a word Yar Ali Khan sheathed his knife and secured his rifle from among the pack-rolls near the blankets. Gordon likewise armed himself and also fastened to his belt a coil of thin, strong rope with a short iron hook at one end of it. He had found such a rope invaluable time and again in mountain travel. The moon had risen higher, fully lighting the canyon, drawing a thin thread of silver along the middle of the ravine. That was enough light for men like Gordon and Yar Ali Khan.

Through the moonlight they approached the ravine-mouth, rifles in hand, clearly limned for any marksmen who, after all, might be skulking there, but ready to take the chances of luck, or fate, or fortune or whatever it is that decides the destiny of men on blind trails. No shot cracked, no furtive figures flitted among the shadows. The blood drops sprinkled the rocky floor thickly. Obviously the Yezidees had carried away some grim wounds.

Gordon thought of Ahmed Shah, lying dead back there in the canyon, without a cairn to cover his body. But time could not be spared now for the dead. The Yusufzai was past hurting; but Lal Singh was a prisoner in the hands of men to whom mercy was unknown. Later Ahmed Shah's body could be taken care of; just now the task at hand was to track down the Yezidees and get the Sikh away from them before they killed him — if, indeed, they had not done that already.

They pushed up the ravine without hesitation, rifles cocked. They went afoot, for they believed their enemies were on foot, unless horses were hidden somewhere up the ravine; the gulch was so narrow and rugged that a horseman would be at a fatal disadvantage in any kind of fight.

At each bend of the ravine they expected and were prepared for an ambush, but the trail of blood drops led on, and no figures barred their way. The blood drops were not so thick now, but they were still sufficient to mark the way.

Gordon quickened his pace, hopeful of overtaking the Yezidees, who now seemed undoubtedly in flight. They had a long start, but if, as he believed, they were carrying one or more wounded men, and were likewise burdened with a prisoner who would not make things any more convenient for them than he could help, that lead might be rapidly cut down. He believed that the Sikh was alive, since they had not found his body, and if the Yezidees had killed him, they would have had no reason for hiding the corpse.

The ravine pitched steeply upward, narrowing, then widened as it descended and abruptly made a crook and came out into another

canyon running roughly east and west, and only a few hundred feet wide. The blood-spattered trail ran straight across to the sheer south wall — and ceased.

Yar Ali Khan grunted. “The Ghilzai dogs spoke truth. The trail stops at a cliff that only a bird could fly over.”

Gordon halted at the foot of the cliff, puzzled. They had lost the trace of the ancient road in the Gorge of Ghosts, but this was the way the Yezidees had come, without a doubt. Blood spattered a trail to the foot of the cliffs — then ceased as if those who bled had simply dissolved into thin air.

He ran his eyes up the sheer pitch of the wall which rose straight up for hundreds of feet. Directly above him, at a height of some fifteen feet, a narrow ledge jutted, a mere outcropping some ten or fifteen feet in length and only a few feet wide. It seemed to offer no solution to the mystery. But halfway up to the ledge he saw a dull reddish smear on the rock of the wall.

Following this lead blindly, Gordon uncoiled his rope, whirled the weighted end about his head and sent it curving upward. The hook bit into the rim of the ledge and held, and Gordon went up it, climbing the thin, smooth strand as swiftly and easily as most men would manipulate a rope-ladder. He had not sailed the Seven Seas without profiting by the experience of climbing ropes, in all sorts of weather.

As he passed the smear on the stone he confirmed his belief that it was blood. A wounded man being hauled up to the ledge, or climbing as he was climbing, might have left such a smear.

Yar Ali Khan, below him, fidgeted with his rifle, trying to get a better view of the ledge, and alternately criticizing his companion’s action, and adjuring him to caution. His pessimistic imagination peopled the ledge with assassins lying prone and unseen; but the shelf lay bare when Gordon pulled himself over the edge.

The first thing he saw was a heavy iron ring set deep in the stone above the ledge, out of sight of anyone below. The metal was worn bright as if by the friction of much usage. More blood was smeared

thickly at the place where a man would come up over the rim, if he climbed a rope fastened to the ring, or was hoisted.

And yet more blood drops spattered the ledge, leading diagonally across it toward the sheer wall, which showed considerable weathering at that point. And Gordon saw something else — the blurred but unmistakable print of bloody fingers on the rock of the wall. He stood motionless for a few moments, heedless of Yar Ali Khan's importunities, while he studied the cracks in the rock. Presently he laid his hand on the wall over the bloody finger-prints, and shoved. Instantly, smoothly, a section of wall swung inward, and he was staring into a narrow tunnel, dimly lit by the moon somewhere behind it.

Wary as a stalking panther he stepped into it, and immediately heard a startled yelp from Yar Ali Khan, to whose inadequate view it had seemed that he had simply melted into the solid rock. Gordon emerged head and shoulders to objurgate his astounded follower to silence, and then continued his investigations.

The tunnel was short, and moonlight poured into it from the other end where it opened into a cleft. The moonlight slanted down from above into this cleft, which ran straight for a hundred feet and then made an abrupt bend, blocking further view. It was like a knife-cut through a block of solid rock.

The door through which he had entered was an irregular-shaped slab of rock, hung on heavy, well-oiled iron hinges. It fit perfectly into its aperture, and its irregular shape made the cracks appear to be merely seams in the cliffs, produced by time and erosion.

A rope ladder made of heavy rawhide was coiled on a small rock shelf just inside the tunnel mouth, and with this Gordon returned to the ledge outside. He drew up his rope and coiled it, then made fast the ladder and let it down, and Yar Ali Khan swarmed up it in a frenzy of impatience to be at his friend's side again.

He swore softly as he comprehended the mystery of the vanishing trail.

"But why was not the door bolted on the inside, *sahib*?"

“Probably men are coming and going constantly. Men outside might have desperate need of passing through this door, without having to shout for someone to come and let them in. There wasn’t a chance in a thousand of its ever being discovered. I wouldn’t have discovered it if it hadn’t been for the blood-marks; at that I was just playing a hunch, when I pushed on the rock.”

Yar Ali Khan was for plunging instantly into the cleft, but Gordon had become wary. He had not seen or heard anything that would indicate the presence of a sentry, but he did not believe that a people who showed so much craft in concealing the entrance to their country would leave it unguarded, however slight might be the chances of its discovery.

He hauled up the raw-hide ladder, coiled it back on the shelf and closed the door, cutting off the circulation of the moonlight and plunging that end of the tunnel into darkness, in which he commanded Yar Ali Khan to await his report. The Afridi cursed under his breath, but Gordon believed that one man could reconnoiter beyond that cryptic bend better than two, and as usual he had his way. Yar Ali Khan squatted in the darkness by the door, hugging his rifle and muttering anathema, while Gordon strode down the tunnel and into the cleft.

This was simply a narrow split in the great solid mass of the cliffs, and an irregular knife-edge of star-lit sky was visible, hundreds of feet overhead. Enough moonlight found its way into the crevice to make it light enough for Gordon’s catlike eyes.

He had not reached the bend when a scruffing of feet beyond it warned him. He had scarcely concealed himself behind a broken outcropping of rock that was split away from the side-wall, when the sentry came. He came leisurely, and in the manner of one who performs a routine task perfunctorily, secure in his conviction of the inaccessibility of his retreat. He was a squat Mongol with a square, copperish face, wicked slanted eyes, and a wide gash-like mouth. Altogether, his appearance was not unlike those devils which abound in Hill-country legends as he strode along with the wide roll of a horseman, trailing a high-powered rifle.

He was passing Gordon's hiding-place when some obscure instinct brought him about like a flash, teeth bared in a startled snarl, rifle jumping for a shot from the hip. But even as he turned, Gordon was on his feet with the instant uncoiling of steel spring muscles, and as the rifle muzzle leaped to a level, the scimitar lashed down. The Mongol dropped like an ox, his round skull split to the teeth.

Gordon crouched motionless, glaring along the corridor. As no sound gave indications that anyone else was within hearing, he risked a low whistle which brought Yar Ali Khan headlong into the cleft, teeth bared and eyes blazing in expectancy of a fight.

He grunted expressively at the sight of the dead man.

"Yes — another Erlik-worshipper. The devil who sired them only knows how many more are hidden along this defile. We'll drag him behind these rocks where I hid. It's usually a good plan to hide the body, when you've made a kill. Come on! If there were any more around that bend, they'd have heard the blow I struck."

Gordon was correct. Beyond the bend the long, deep defile ran empty to the next kink. Gordon believed that the man he had killed was the only sentry posted in the cleft, and they strode on without hesitation. The moonlight in the narrow gash above them was paling when they emerged into the open at last. Here the defile broke into a chaos of broken rock, and the single gorge became half a dozen, threading between gaunt isolated crags and split-off rocks like the separate mouths of a river that splits into streams at the delta. Crumbling pinnacles and turrets of black stone stood up like gaunt ghosts in the grey light which betrayed the coming of dawn.

Threading their way between these grim sentinels, they presently looked out upon a level, rock-strewn floor that stretched for three hundred yards to the foot of an abrupt cliff. The trail they had been following, grooved by many feet in the weathered stone, crossed the level and looped up the cliff, tier by tier, on ramps cut in the rock. But what lay on top of the cliffs they could not guess. To right and left the solid wall veered away, flanked by the broken pinnacles.

“What now, *sahib?*” In the grey light the Afridi looked like a mountain goblin surprized out of his crag-cave by dawn.

“I think we must be close to our destination. Listen!”

Over the cliffs rolled the blare they had heard the night before, but now much nearer — the strident, awesome, sullen roar of the giant trumpet.

“Have we been seen?” wondered Yar Ali Khan, working the bolt of his rifle.

“That is on the lap of Allah. But we must see, and we can not climb that road up the cliff without first knowing what lies above it. Here! This will serve our purpose.”

It was a weathered crag which rose like a tower among its lesser fellows. Any Hill-bred child could have scaled it. Yar Ali Khan and Gordon went up it almost as swiftly as if it had been a stairway, being careful to keep its bulk between them and the opposite cliffs, until they reached the summit, which was higher than the cliffs, and lay behind a spur of rock, staring through the rosy haze of the rising dawn.

“Allah!” swore Yar Ali Khan, involuntarily reaching for the rifle slung on his back.

Seen from their vantage point the opposite cliffs assumed their real nature as one side of a gigantic mesa-like block which reminded Gordon of the formations of his native Southwest. It rose sheer from the surrounding level, four to five hundred feet in height, and its perpendicular sides seemed unscalable except for the point where the trail had been laboriously cut into the stone. East, north and west it was girdled by crumbling crags, separated from the plateau by the level canyon floor which varied in width from three hundred yards to half a mile. On the south the plateau abutted on a gigantic, bare mountain whose gaunt peaks dominated the surrounding pinnacles.

But the watchers devoted only a glance to the geographical formation, mechanically analyzing and appreciating it. It was an

incredible phenomenon of another nature which gripped their whole attention.

Gordon had not been sure just what he expected to find at the end of the bloody trail. He had anticipated a rendezvous of some kind, certainly: a cluster of horse-hide tents, a cavern, perhaps even a village of mud and stone nestling on a hill-side. But they were looking at a city whose domes and towers glistened in the rosy dawn, like a magic city of sorcerers stolen from some fabled land and set down in this desert spot!

"The city of the *djinn!*" ejaculated Yar Ali Khan, jolted back into his original belief concerning the nature of their enemies. "Allah is my protection against the evil of *Shaitan* the Damned!" He snapped his fingers in a gesture older than Muhammad.

The plateau was roughly oval in shape, about a mile and a half in length from north to south, somewhat less than a mile in width from east to west. The city stood near the southern extremity, etched against the dark mountain behind it, its flat-topped stone houses and clustering trees dominated by a large edifice whose purple dome gleamed in the sharp dawn, shot with gold.

"Enchantment and necromancy!" exclaimed Yar Ali Khan, completely upset.

Gordon did not reply, but the Celtic blood in his veins responded to the somber aspect of the scene. The harsh gauntness of the gloomy black crags was not softened by the contrast of the city; that instead partook of their sullen menace, in spite of its masses of green and sheen of color. The glitter of its purple, gold-traced dome was sinister. The black crags, crumbling with unholy antiquity, were a fit setting for it. It was like a city of demoniac mystery, rising amidst ruin and decay, and gleaming only with sinful life.

"This must be the stronghold of the Hidden Ones," muttered Gordon. "I'd expected eventually to find their headquarters concealed in the native quarter of some city like Delhi, or Bombay. But this is a logical point. From here they can strike at all the countries of Western Asia and have a safe hideout to retire to. But

who would have expected to find a city like that here, in a country so long supposed to be practically uninhabited?"

"Not even we can fight a whole city, whether devils or men," grunted Yar Ali Khan.

Gordon fell silent while he studied the distant view. Carefully analyzed, the city did not show to be so large as it had appeared to be at first glance. It was compactly planned, but unwalled. The houses, two or three stories in height, stood among clusters of trees and surprizing gardens — surprizing because the plateau seemed almost solid rock, as far as the watchers could see. Gordon reached a decision.

"Ali, hasten back to our camp in the Gorge of Ghosts. Take the horses and ride for Khor. Tell Baber Khan all that has occurred, and say to him that I need him and all his swords. Bring the Ghilzai through the cleft and halt them among these defiles until you get a signal from me, or know that I'm dead. Here's a chance to sever two necks with the same stroke. If Baber Khan helps us wipe out this nest of vipers, the Amir will pardon him."

"*Shaitan* devour Baber Khan! What of thee?"

"I'm going into that city."

"*Wallah!*" swore the Afridi.

"I've got to. The Yezidees have gone there, and Lal Singh must be with them. They may kill him before the Ghilzai could get here. I've got to get him away before we can lay any plans about attacking the city. If you start now, you can get to Khor shortly after nightfall. If you start back from Khor immediately, you should arrive at this spot shortly after sun-up. If I'm alive and at liberty, I'll meet you here. If I don't, let you and Baber Khan use your own judgment. But the important thing just now is to get the Ghilzais here."

Yar Ali Khan immediately found objections.

"Baber Khan has no love for me. If I go to him alone he will spit in my beard and I will kill him and then his dogs will kill me!"

"He'll do no such thing, and you know it."

“He will not come!”

“He’d come through Hell if I sent for him.”

“His men will not follow him; they fear devils.”

“They’ll come fast enough when you tell them it is men who haunt *Ghulistan.*”

“But the horses will be gone. The devils will have stolen them.”

“I doubt it. No one has left the city since we took the trail, and no one has come in behind us. Anyway, you can make it to Khor on foot, if necessary. It will just take longer.”

Then Yar Ali Khan tore his beard in wrath and voiced his real objection to leaving Gordon.

“Those sons of dogs in that city will flay you alive!”

“Nay, I will match guile with guile. I will be a fugitive from the wrath of the Amir, an outlaw seeking sanctuary. The East is full of lies concerning me. They will aid me now.”

Yar Ali Khan abandoned the argument suddenly, realizing the uselessness of it. Grumbling in his beard, wagging his turbaned head direfully, the Afridi clambered down the crag and vanished in the defile without a backward look.

When he was out of sight, Gordon likewise descended and went toward the cliffs.

III
The People of Ismail

Gordon expected, at each step, to be fired at from the cliffs, although he had seen no sentinels among the rocks at their crest, when he looked from the crag. But he crossed the canyon, reached the foot of the cliff and began mounting the steep road — still flecked here and there with red drops — without having sighted any human being. The trail wound interminably up a succession of ramps, with low heavy walls on the outer edge. He had time to admire the engineering ability which made that road possible.

Obviously it was no work of Afghan hillmen, and just as obviously its construction had not been recent. It looked ancient, strong as the mountain itself.

For the last thirty feet the ramps gave way to a flight of steep steps cut into the rock, making a deepening slot as they approached the crest. Still no one challenged him, and he came out on the plateau among a cluster of boulders, from behind which seven men who had been squatting over a game, sprang to their feet and glared wildly at him as if he had been an apparition. They were Kurds to a man, lean, hard-bodied warriors with hawk-beak noses, their slim waists girdled by cartridge-belts, and with rifles in their hands.

These rifles were instantly levelled at him. Gordon made no move, nor did he display either perturbation or surprize. He set his rifle-butt on the ground and eyed the startled Kurds tranquilly.

These cut-throats were undecided as cornered wildcats, and therefore equally dangerous and unpredictable. His life hung on the crook of a nervous trigger-finger. But for the moment they merely glared, struck dumb by his unexpected materialization.

“El Borak!” muttered the tallest of the Kurds, his eyes blazing with fear and suspicion and the instinct to kill. “What do you do here?”

Gordon ran his eyes leisurely over them all before he replied, an easy, relaxed figure standing carelessly before those seven tense shapes.

“I seek your master,” he replied presently.

This did not seem to reassure them. They began to mutter among themselves, never relaxing the vigilance of eye or trigger finger.

The tallest Kurd’s voice rose irascibly, dominating the others: “You chatter like crows! This thing is plain: we were gambling and did not see him come. Our duty is to watch the Stair and see that no one mounts it without permission. We have failed in our duty. If it is known there will be punishment. Let us slay him and throw him over the cliff.”

“Aye,” agreed Gordon equably. “Do so. And when your master asks: ‘Where is El Borak, who brought me important news?’ say to him: ‘Lo, thou didst not consult with us concerning this man, and so we slew him to teach thee a lesson!’”

They winced at the biting irony of his words and tone, and shot uneasy glances at one another.

“None will ever know,” growled one. “Shoot him.”

“Nay, the shot would be heard and there would be questions to answer.”

“Cut his throat!” suggested the youngest of the band, and was scowled at so murderously by his fellows that he fell back in confusion.

“Aye, cut my throat,” advised Gordon, laughing at them. “*One* of you might survive to tell the tale.”

This was no mere bombast, as most of them knew, and they betrayed their uneasiness in their black scowls. They yearned to slay him, but they dared not use their rifles; and at least the older warriors knew the ghastly price they would pay for attacking him with edged weapons. He would have no compunction about using either the rifle in his hand, or the pistol they knew he carried concealed somewhere.

“Knives are silent,” muttered the youngster, trying to justify himself.

He was rewarded by receiving a rifle butt driven angrily into his belly, which made him salaam involuntarily, and then lift his voice in gasping lamentation.

“Be silent, son of a dog! Would you have us fight El Borak’s guns with naked steel?”

Having worked off some of their dissatisfaction on their unfortunate comrade, the Kurds grew calmer, and one of the others inquired of Gordon, uncertainly: “You are expected?”

“Would I come here if I were not expected? Does the lamb thrust his head unbidden into the jaws of the wolf?”

“Lamb?” The Kurds cackled sardonically. “Thou a lamb? Ha, Allah! Say, rather, does the grey wolf with blood on his fangs seek the hunter!”

“If there is blood on my fangs it is but the blood of fools who disobeyed their master’s commands,” retorted Gordon. “Last night, in the Gorge of Ghosts —”

“*Ya Allah! Was* it thee the Yezidee fools fought? They knew thee not! They said they had slain an Englishman and his servants in the Gorge.”

So that was why the sentries were so careless; for some reason the Yezidees had lied about the outcome of that battle, and the watchers of the Road were not expecting any pursuit.

“None of you was among those who in their ignorance fell upon me in the Gorge?”

“Do we limp? Do we bleed? Do we weep from weariness and wounds? Nay, we have not fought El Borak!”

“Then be wise and do not make the mistake they made, for which mistake some are dead and the skin shall be taken in strips from the backs of the living. And now, will you take me to him who awaits me, or will you cast dung in his beard by scorning his orders?”

“Allah forbid!” ejaculated the tall Kurd. “No order had been given us. Nay, El Borak, thy heart is full of guile as a serpent’s, and where thou walkest, there swords are crimsoned and men die. But if this be a lie then our master shall see thy death. And if it be not a lie, then we can have no blame. Give up thy rifle and scimitar, and we will conduct thee to him.”

Gordon surrendered the weapons, secure in the knowledge of the big pistol reposing in its shoulder scabbard under his left arm.

The leader then picked up the rifle dropped by the young Kurd, who was still bent double and groaning heartily; straightened him with a resounding kick in the rear; shoved the rifle in his hands and bade him watch the Stair as if his life depended on it; gave him

another kick, and a cuff on the ear by way of emphasis, and turned, barked orders to the others.

As they closed in around the apparently unarmed American, Gordon knew their hands itched for a knife-thrust in his back; but he had sown the seeds of fear and uncertainty in their primitive minds, and he knew they dared not strike. They moved out of the clustering boulders and started along the wide, well-marked road that led to the city. That road had once been paved, and in some places the paving was still in fair condition.

“The Yezidees passed into the city just before dawn?” he asked casually, making a swift estimation of the time element.

“Aye,” was the brief reply.

“They could not march fast,” mused Gordon, almost as if to himself. “They had wounded men to carry. And then the Sikh they had prisoner would be stubborn. They would have to beat and prod and drag him.”

One of the men turned his head and began: “Why, the Sikh —”

The leader barked him to silence, and turned on Gordon a gaze baleful with suspicion.

“Let not another man speak. Do not answer his questions. Ask him none. If he mocks us, retort not. He is a serpent for craft. If we talk to him he will have us bewitched before we reach Shalizahr.”

So that was the name of that fantastic city; Gordon seemed to remember the name in some medieval historical connection.

“Why do you mistrust me?” he demanded. “Have I not come to you with open hands?”

“Aye! Once I saw you come to the Turks of Bitlis with open hands; but when you closed those hands the streets of Bitlis ran red and the heads of the lords of Bitlis swung from the saddles of your raiders. Nay, El Borak, I know you of old, from the days when you led your outlaws through the hills of Kurdistan. I fought with you against the Turks, and later, because of a change in politics, I fought with the Turks against you. I can not match my hand against your hand, nor

my brain against your brain, nor my tongue against your tongue. But I can keep my tongue between my teeth, and I shall. You need not seek to trap me with cunning words, for I will not speak. I am taking you to the master of Shalizahr. All your dealing shall be with him. That is none of my affair. I am as mute and without thought in the matter as the horse who bears king or outlaw alike. My responsibility is only to bring you before my master. In the meantime you shall not trap me into a snare. I will not speak, and if any of my men answer you, I will break his head with my rifle butt."

“I thought I recognized you,” said Gordon. “You are Yusuf ibn Suleiman. You were a good fighter.”

The Kurd’s lean, scarred visage lighted at the remark, and he started to speak — then recollected himself, scowled ferociously, swore at one with his men who had not offended in any way, squared his shoulders uncompromisingly, and strode stiffly ahead of the party.

Gordon did not stride; rather he strolled, and his tranquil attitude had its effect on his captors. He had the air of a man walking amidst an escort of honor, rather than a guard, and his bearing reacted upon them, so by the time they reached the city they were shouldering their rifles instead of carrying them at the ready, and allowing a respectful interval between themselves and him.

Details of Shalizahr stood out as they approached. Gordon saw the secrets of the groves and gardens. Soil, doubtless brought laboriously from distant valleys, had been superimposed upon the bare rock in some of the many depressions which pitted the surface of the plateau, and an elaborate system of irrigation canals, deep, narrow channels which presented the minimum surface for evaporation, threaded the gardens, apparently originating in some inexhaustible water supply near the center of the city. The plateau, sheltered by the crumbling peaks which rose on all sides, presented a more moderate climate than was common in those mountains, and the hardy vegetation grew in abundance.

The gardens lay mostly on the east and west sides of the city. The road, as it entered the city, ran between a large orchard on the left, and a smaller garden on the right. Both were enclosed by low stone walls, and Gordon could not foresee the bloody part that orchard was to play in this strange adventure into which he was going. A wide open space separated the orchard from the nearest house, but on the other side of the road a flat-topped three-story stone house adjoined the garden on the south. A few yards on the city proper began — lines of flat-roofed stone houses fronting each other across the wide, paved street, each with an expanse of garden behind it.

There was no wall about the city, and the walls about the gardens and the houses were low, obviously not intended for defense. The plateau itself was a fortress. The mountain which frowned above and behind the city stood at a greater distance than it had seemed when first he saw it. From the crag it had appeared that the city backed up against the mountain slope. Now he saw that nearly half a mile of ravine-gashed plain separated the city from the mountain. The plateau was, however, connected with the mountain; it was like a great shelf jutting out from the massive slope.

Men at work in the gardens and loitering along the street halted and stared at the Kurds and their captive. He saw more Kurds, many Persians, and Yezidees; he saw Arabs, Mongols, Druses, Turks, Indians, even a few Egyptians. But no Afghans. Evidently the heterogenous population of that strange city had no affiliations with the native inhabitants of the land.

The people did not carry their curiosity beyond questioning stares. The street widened into a *suk* closed on the south side by a broad wall which enclosed the palatial building with its gorgeous dome.

There was no guard at the massive bronze-barred, gold-worked gates, only a gay-clad negro who salaamed deeply as he swung the portals open. Gordon and his escort came into a broad courtyard paved with colored tile, in the midst of which a fountain bubbled and pigeons fluttered about it. East and west the court was bounded by inner walls over which peeped foliage that told of more gardens, and Gordon noticed a slim tower that rose almost as high as the dome itself, its lacy tilework gleaming in the sunlight.

The Kurds marched straight on across the court and were halted on the broad pillared portico of the palace by a guard of thirty Arabs in resplendent regalia — plumed helmets of silvered steel, gilded corselets, rhinoceros-hide shields, and gold-chased scimitars, which archaic accoutrements contrasted curiously with the modern rifles in their hands, and the cartridge-belts which girdled their lean waists.

The hawk-faced captain of the guard conversed briefly with Yusuf ibn Suleiman, and Gordon divined that no love was lost between these members of rival races, whatever circumstances had brought them into alliance.

The captain, whom men addressed as Muhammad ibn Ahmed, presently made a gesture with his slim brown hand, and Gordon was surrounded by a dozen glittering Arabs, and marched among them up the broad marble steps and through the wide arch whose bronze scroll-worked doors stood wide. The Kurds followed, without their rifles, and not looking at all happy.

They passed through wide, dim-lit halls, from the vaulted and fretted ceilings of which hung smoking bronze censers, while on either hand velvet-curtained arches hinted at inner mysteries. Tapestries rustled, soft footfalls whispered, and once Gordon saw a slim white hand grasping a hanging as if the owner peered from behind it. Accustomed as he was to the furtiveness and subdued undertones of Eastern palaces, Gordon sensed here a more than ordinary atmosphere of mystery and secrecy.

Even the swagger of the Arabs — all except their captain — was modified. The Kurds were openly uneasy. Mystery and intangible menace lurked in those dim, gorgeous halls. He might have been traversing a palace of Nineveh or ancient Persia, but for the modern weapons of his escort.

Presently they marched into a broader hall-way and approached a double-valved bronze door, flanked by more gorgeously-clad guardsmen, Persians, these, scented and painted like the warriors of Cambyses, and holding antique-looking spears instead of rifles.

These bizarre figures stood as impassively as statues while the Arabs swaggered by with their captive — or guest — and entered a semicircular room where dragon-worked tapestries covered the walls, hiding all possible doors or windows except the one by which they had entered. The ceiling was lofty and arched, worked in fretted gold and ebony, hung with golden lamps. Opposite from the great doorway there stood a marble dais. On the dais there stood a

great canopied chair, scrolled and carved like a throne, and on the velvet cushions which littered the seat lolled a slender figure in a pearl-sewn silk *khalat*, and cloth-of-gold slippers with turned-up toes. On the rose-colored turban glistened a great gold brooch, set with diamonds, made in the shape of a human hand gripping a three-bladed dagger. The face beneath the turban was oval, the color of old ivory, with a small black pointed beard. The eyes were wide, dark and contemplative. The man was a Persian.

On either side of the throne stood a giant Sudanese, like images of heathen gods carved out of black basalt, naked but for sandals and silken loin-cloths, with broad-bladed tulwars in their hands.

"Who is this?" languidly inquired the man on the throne, speaking Arabic, and gesturing for his henchmen to cease their energetic salaaming.

"El Borak! answered Muhammad ibn Ahmed, with a definite swagger, in his consciousness that the announcement of that name would create something of a sensation — as it would anywhere East of Stamboul.

The dark eyes quickened with interest, sharpened with suspicion, and Yusuf ibn Suleiman, watching his master's face with painful intensity, drew in a quick breath and clenched his hands so the nails bit into the palms.

"How comes he in Shalizahr unannounced?"

"The Kurdish dogs who are supposed to watch the Stair said he came to them, swearing that he had been sent for by the Shaykh Al Jebal!"

Gordon stiffened as he heard that title. It clinched all his suspicions. It was fantastic, incredible; yet it was true. His black eyes fixed with fierce intensity on the oval face.

He did not speak. There was a time for silence as well as for bold speech. His next move depended entirely on the Shaykh's next words. A word would brand him as an impostor and defeat his whole plan. But he depended on two things: the belief that no Eastern ruler would order El Borak slain without first trying to learn

the reason behind his presence; and the fact that few Eastern rulers either enjoy the full confidence of their followers, or wholly trust those followers in their turn.

The man on the throne gave back Gordon's burning stare for a space, then spoke at, but not to the Kurd: "This is the law of Shalizahr: the Watchers of the Stair must allow no man to ascend the Stair until he has made the Sign so they can see. If he is a stranger who does not know the Sign, the Warder of the Gate must be summoned to converse with the man before he is allowed to mount the Stair. El Borak was not announced. The Warder of the Gate was not summoned. Did El Borak make the Sign, below the Stair?"

Yusuf ibn Suleiman was pale and sweating, as he plainly wavered between a dangerous truth, and a lie that might be even more dangerous. He shot a venomous glance at Gordon and spoke in a voice harsh with apprehension: "The guard in the cleft did not give warning. El Borak appeared upon the cliff before we saw him, though we stood at the head of the Stair watching like eagles. He is a magician who makes himself invisible at will. We knew he spoke truth when he said you had sent for him, otherwise he could not have known the secret way —"

Perspiration beaded the Kurd's narrow forehead. The man on the throne did not seem to hear his voice, and Muhammad ibn Ahmed, quick to sense that the Kurd had fallen in disfavor, struck Yusuf savagely in the mouth with his open hand.

"Dog, be silent until the Protector of the Pitiful deigns to command thy speech!"

Yusuf reeled, blood starting down his beard, and looked black murder at the Arab, but he said nothing.

The Persian moved his hand languidly, yet with impatience.

"Take the Kurds away. Keep them under guard until further orders. Even if a man is expected, they should not be surprized. El Borak did not know the Sign, yet he climbed the Stair unhindered. If

they had been vigilant not even El Borak could have done this. He is no magician. Send other men to watch the Stair.

"You have my leave to go; I will talk to El Borak alone."

Muhammad ibn Ahmed salaamed and led his glittering swordsmen away between the silent files of spearmen lined on each side of the door, herding the shivering Kurds before them. These turned as they passed through the door and fixed their burning eyes on Gordon in a silent glare of hate.

Muhammad ibn Ahmed pulled the bronze doors shut behind them. The Persian spoke in English to Gordon.

"Speak freely. These black men do not understand English."

Gordon, before replying, kicked a divan up before the dais and settled himself comfortably on it, with his feet propped on a velvet footstool. He had not established his prestige in the Orient by meek bearing or timid behavior. Where another man might have tip-toed, hat in hand and heart in mouth, Gordon strode with heavy boots and heavy hand, and because he was El Borak, he lived where other men died. His attitude was no bluff. He was ready at all times to back up his play with hot lead and cold steel, and men knew it, just as they knew that he was the most dangerous man with any sort of weapon between Cairo and Peking.

The Persian showed no surprize that his captive — or guest — should seat himself without asking permission. His first words showed that he had had much dealings with Westerners, and had, for his own purposes, adopted some of their directness. For he said, without preamble: "I did not send for you."

"Of course not. But I had to tell those fools something, or else kill them all."

"What do you want here?"

"What does any man want who comes to a nest of outlaws?"

"He might come as a spy," pointed out the Shaykh.

Gordon laughed at him. "For whom?"

"How did you know the Road?"

Gordon took refuge in the obscurity of Eastern subtlety.

“I followed the vultures; they always lead me to my goal.”

“They should,” was the grim reply. “You have fed them full often enough. What of the Mongol who watched the cleft?”

“Dead; he wouldn’t listen to reason.”

“The vultures follow you, not you the vultures,” commented the Shaykh. “Why did you not send word to me of your coming?”

“Send word by whom? Last night as I camped in the Gorge of Ghosts, resting my horses before I pushed on to Shalizahr, a gang of your fools fell on my party in the darkness, killed one and carried another away. The fourth man was frightened and ran away. I came on alone as soon as the moon rose.”

“They were Yezidees, whose duty it is to watch the Gorge of Ghosts. They did not know you sought me. They limped into the city at dawn, with one man dying and most of the others sorely wounded, and swore that they had slain a *sahib* and his servants in the Gorge of Ghosts. Evidently they feared to admit that they ran away, leaving you alive. They shall smart for their lie. But you have not told me why you came here.”

“I seek refuge. And I bring news. The man you sent to kill the Amir wounded him and was himself cut to pieces by the Uzbek guardsmen.”

The Persian shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

“Your news is stale. We knew that before the noon of the day after the night the execution was attempted. And we have since learned that the Amir will live, because an English physician cleansed the wounds of the poison which was on the dagger.”

That sounded like black magic, until Gordon remembered the pigeons in the courtyard. Carrier birds, of course, and agents in Kabul to release them with the messages.

“We have kept our secret well,” said the Persian. “Since you knew of Shalizahr and the Road to Shalizahr, you must have been told of it by some one of the Brotherhood. Did Bagheela send you?”

Gordon's pause before replying was no longer than it took him to flick a bit of dust from his breeches, but in that space he recognized the trap laid for him and avoided it. He had no idea who Bagheela was, and this innocent-appearing question was too obviously a bait an impostor might be tempted to seize.

"I don't know the man you call Bagheela," he answered. "No one took me into his confidence. I don't have to be told secrets. I learn them for myself. I came here because I had to have a hide-out. I'm out of favor at Kabul, and the English would have me shot if they could catch me."

One of the most persistent legends in circulation about Gordon was that he was an enemy of the English. This had its basis in his refusal to be awed by gold braid and brass buttons, and in his comings and goings in tranquil disregard of all rules and regulations that apply to the general run of folk. He had no reverence for the authority which bedecks itself in pomp and arrogance and arbitrary worship of precedence, and he did have an abiding contempt for certain types of officials, whether civilian or military; so he was violently hated by the latter, and their opinion was sometimes accepted by the unthinking as an index of governmental opinion. But the men who actually rule India, moving unobtrusively behind the scenes, knew El Borak for what he really was, and though they did not always approve of his methods, they were his friends, and had profited by his aid time and again.

But the Persian had no way of knowing this. He knew just enough about Gordon to be readily deceived as to the American's true character. Much of the tales he had heard about him had been lies, or facts distorted out of all proportion. To the Shaykh El Borak was just another lawless adventurer, not quite gone native, but still beyond the pale of respectability, and therefore quite likely to fall foul of the government at any time.

He said something in scholarly and archaic Persian and Gordon, knowing that he would not change the language of their conversation without a subtle reason, feigned ignorance of the

tongue. Sometimes the deviousness of the East is childishly transparent.

The Shaykh spoke to one of the blacks, and that giant stolidly drew a silver hammer from his girdle and smote a golden gong hanging among the tapestries. The echoes had scarcely died away when the bronze doors opened long enough to admit a slim man in plain silken robes who stood bowing before the dais; a Persian, like the Shaykh. The latter addressed him as Musa, and asked him a question in the tongue he had just tested on Gordon.

"You know this man?"

"Aye, *ya sidna;* he is —"

"Do not speak his name; he does not understand us, but he would recognize his name and know we discussed him. Have our spies included him in their reports?"

"Yes, *ya sidna*. The last despatch from Kabul bore word of him. On the night that your servant attempted to execute the Amir, this man talked with the Amir secretly, an hour or so before the attack was made. After leaving the palace, he fled from the city with three men, and was seen riding along the road that leads to the village of the outlaw, Baber Khan of Khor. He was pursued by horsemen from Kabul, but whether they gave up the chase or were slain by the men of Khor, I do not know."

"It would seem he spoke truth, then, when he said he was out of favor at Kabul," mused the Shaykh.

Gordon, lounging on the divan and showing no sign that he understood, realized two things: the spy system of the Hidden Ones was more elaborate and far-reaching than he had guessed; and a chain of misunderstood circumstances were working in his favor. It was natural for these men to think that he had fled from Kabul under the shadow of royal displeasure. That he should ride for the village of an outlaw would seem to clinch the matter, as well as the fact of his "pursuit" by the royal horsemen.

"You have my leave to go."

Musa bowed and departed, closing the doors, and the Shaykh meditated in silence for a space. Presently he lifted his head, as if coming to a decision, and said: “I believe you are telling me the truth. You fled from Kabul, to Khor, where no friend of the Amir would be welcome. And your enmity toward the English is well known. The *Batinis* need such a man as you. But I can not initiate you into the Brotherhood until the lord Bagheela sees and passes on you. He is not in Shalizahr at the present, but he will be here by tomorrow dawn.

“In the meantime, I would like to know how you learned of our society and of our city.”

Gordon shrugged his shoulders.

“What is concealed from me of the mysteries of the Hills? I hear the secrets the wind sings as it blows through the branches of the dry tamarisks. I understand the cry of the kites as they wheel above the gorges of Gomul. I know what tales are whispered about the dung-fires that the men of the caravans build in the crowded *serais.*”

“Then you know our purpose? Our ambition?”

“I know what you call yourselves. Long ago there was another city on a mountain, ruled by *emirs* who called themselves Shaykhs Al Jebal — the Old Men of the Mountain. Their followers were called Assassins. They were hemp-eaters, *hashish* addicts, and their terrorist methods made the Shaykhs feared all over Western Asia.”

“Aye!” a dark fire lit the Persian’s eyes. “Saladin himself feared them. The Crusaders feared them. The Shah of Persia, the *emirs* of Damascus, the Khalifs of Bagdad, the Sultans of Egypt and of the Seljuks paid tribute to the Shaykhs Al Jebal. They did not lead armies in the field; they fought by poison and fire and the triple-bladed dagger that bit in the dark. Their scarlet-cloaked emissaries of death went forth with hidden daggers to do their bidding. And kings died in Cairo, in Jerusalem, in Samarcand, in Brusa. On Mount Alamut, in Persia, the first Shaykh, Hassan ibn Sabah, built his great castle-city, with its hidden gardens where his followers were permitted to taste the joys of paradise where dancing girls fair as

houris flitted among the blossoms and the dreams of *hashish* gilded all with rapture."

"The follower was drugged and placed in the garden," grunted Gordon. "He thought he was in the Prophet's Paradise. Later he was drugged again and removed, and told that to regain this rapture he had only to obey the Shaykh to the death. No king was ever given such absolute obedience as the *fedauis* accorded the Shaykhs. Until the Mongols under Hulagu Khan destroyed their mountain castles in 1256, they threatened Oriental civilization with destruction."

"Aye! And I am a direct descendant of Hassan ibn Sabah!" A fanatical light gleamed in the dark eyes. "Throughout my youth I dreamed of the greatness of my ancestors. Wealth that flowed suddenly from the barren lands of my family — western money that came to me from minerals found there — made the dream become reality. Othman el Aziz became Shaykh Al Jebal!

"Hassan ibn Sabah was a follower of Ismail, who taught that all deeds and men are one in the sight of Allah. The Ismailian creed is broad and deep as the sea. It overlooks racial and religious differences, and unites men of opposing sects. It is the one power that can ultimately lead to a united Asia. The people of my own native hills had not forgotten the teachings of Ismail, nor the gardens of the *hashishin*. It was from them I recruited my first followers. But others soon flocked to me in the mountains of Kurdistan where I had my first stronghold — Yezidees, Kurds, Druses, Arabs, Persians, Turks — outlaws, men without hope, who were ready even to forswear Muhammad for a taste of Paradise on earth. But the *Batini* creed forswears nothing; it unites. My emissaries travelled throughout Asia, drawing followers to me. I chose my men carefully. My band has grown slowly, for each member was tested to prove that he was fit for my service. Race and creed makes no difference; I have among my *fedauis* Moslems, Hindus, worshippers of Melek Taus from Mount Lalesh, worshippers of Erlik from the Gobi.

"Four years ago I came with my followers to this city, then a crumbling mass of ruins, unknown to the hillmen because their

superstitious legends kept them far from it. Centuries ago it was a city of the Assassins, and was laid waste by the Mongols. When I came the buildings were crumbled stone, the canals filled with rubble, the groves grown wild and tangled. It took three years to rebuild it, and most of my fortune went into the labor, for bringing material here secretly was tedious and dangerous work. We brought it out of Persia, from the west, over the old caravan route, and up an ancient ramp on the western side of the plateau, which I have since destroyed. But at last I looked upon forgotten Shalizahr as it was in the days of the ancient Shaykhs.

"Look!" He rose and beckoned Gordon to follow him. The giant blacks closed in on each side of the Shaykh, and he led the way into an alcove unsuspected until one of the negroes drew aside a tapestry behind the throne. They stood in a latticed balcony looking down into a garden enclosed by a fifteen-foot wall, which wall was almost completely masked by thick shrubbery. An exotic fragrance rose from masses of trees, shrubs and blossoms, and silvery fountains tinkled musically. Gordon saw women moving among the trees, unveiled and scantily clad in filmy silk and jewel-crusted velvet — slim, supple girls, Arab and Persian and Hindu, mostly, and he suddenly saw the explanation of the mysterious disappearances of certain Indian girls, which of late years had increased too greatly to be explained by casual kidnappings by native princelings. Men, looking like opium-sleepers, lay under the trees on silken cushions, and native music wailed melodiously from unseen musicians. It was easy to understand how an Oriental, his senses at once drugged and inflamed by *hashish*, would believe himself to be in the Prophet's Paradise, upon awakening in that fantastic garden.

"I have copied, and improved upon, the *hashish* garden of Hassan ibn Sabah," said the Shaykh, at last closing the cleverly disguised casement and turning back into the throne-room. "I show you this because I do not intend to have you 'taste Paradise' like these others. I am not such a fool as to believe that you would be duped like them. It is not necessary. It does no harm for you to know these secrets. If Bagheela does not approve of you, your knowledge will

die with you; if he does, then you have learned no more than you will learn in any event as one of the Sons of the Mountain.

"You can rise high in the empire I am building. I shall become as powerful as my ancestor was. Three years I was preparing. Then I began to strike. Within the last year my *fedauis* have gone forth with poisoned daggers as they went forth in the old days, knowing no law but my will, incorruptible, invincible, seeking death rather than life."

"And your ultimate ambition?"

"Have you not guessed it?" The Persian almost whispered it, his eyes wide and blank with his strange fanaticism.

"Who wouldn't? But I'd rather hear it from your lips."

"I will rule all Asia! Sitting here in Shalizahr I will control the destinies of the world! Kings on their thrones will be but puppets dancing on my strings. Those who dare disobey my commands shall die suddenly. Soon none will dare disobey. Power will be mine. Power! Allah! What is greater?"

Gordon did not reply. He was comparing the Shaykh's repeated references to his absolute power, with his remarks concerning the mysterious Bagheela who must decide Gordon's status. This would seem to indicate that the Shaykh's authority was not supreme in Shalizahr, after all. Gordon wondered who this Bagheela was. The term merely meant panther, and was probably a little like his own native name of El Borak.

"Where is the Sikh, Lal Singh?" he demanded abruptly. "Your Yezidees carried him away, after they murdered Ahmed Shah."

The Persian's expression of surprize and ignorance was overdone.

"I do not know to whom you refer. The Yezidees brought back no captive with them from the Gorge of Ghosts."

Gordon knew he was lying, but also realized that it would be useless to push his questioning further at that time. He could not imagine why Othman should deny knowledge of the Sikh, whom he

was sure had been brought into the city, but it might be dangerous to press the matter, after a formal denial by the Persian.

The Shaykh motioned to the black who again smote the gong, and again Musa entered, salaaming.

"Musa will show you to a chamber where food and drink will be brought you," he said. "You are not a prisoner, of course. No guard will be placed over you. But I must ask you not to leave your chamber until I send for you. My men are suspicious of *Feringhi,* and until you are formally initiated into the society —"

He left the sentence unfinished.

IV
Whispering Swords

The impassive Musa conducted Gordon through the bronze doors, past the files of glittering guardsmen, and along a narrow, winding corridor which branched off from the broad hallway. Some distance from the audience-chamber he led Gordon into a chamber with a domed ceiling of ivory and sandal-wood, and one heavy, brass-braced mahogany door. There were no windows. Air and light circulated through concealed apertures in the dome. The walls were hung with rich tapestries, the floor hidden by cushion-strewn carpets. But a velvet divan was the only piece of furniture.

Musa bowed himself out without a word, shutting the door behind him, and Gordon seated himself on the couch. This was the most bizarre situation he had ever found himself in, in the course of a life packed with wild adventures and bloody episodes. He felt out of place in his boots and dusty khakis, in this mysterious city that turned the clock of Time back nearly a thousand years. There was a curious sensation of having strayed out of his own age into a lost and forgotten Past; a Past he had known before. It was almost like a flash of memory in which he saw himself, a black-haired, black-eyed warrior from a far western isle, clad in the chain mail of a Crusader, striding through the intrigue-veiled mazes of an Assassin city.

He shook himself impatiently. He more than half believed in rein carnation, but this affair was no ordinary revival of mysticism. The Shaykh Al Jebal might rule supreme in Shalizahr where sleeping ages woke in immemorial life, but Gordon sensed something behind this — a dim gigantic shape looming behind these veils of mystery and illusion.

What was the prize for which the great nations of the world sparred behind locked doors? India! The golden key to Asia.

Something more than the mad whim of a Persian dreamer lay behind this fantastic plot. Rebuilding the city alone would have required a stupendous expenditure of money. He questioned Othman's assertion that he had supplied the money out of his own private fortune. He doubted if any Persian fortune would have proven sufficient. The building of Shalizahr indicated powerful backing, with unlimited resources.

Then Gordon forgot all other angles of the adventure in concern over the fate of Lal Singh. Impassive in contemplating his own peril, and the destiny of nations, he rose and paced the floor like a caged tiger as he brooded over the mystery of the Sikh's disappearance. Why had Othman denied knowledge of the prisoner? That had a sinister suggestion.

Gordon seated himself as he heard sandalled feet pad in the corridor outside, and immediately the door opened and Musa entered, followed by a huge negro bearing viands in gold dishes, and a golden jug of wine. Musa closed the door quickly, but not before Gordon had a glimpse of a helmet spike protruding from the tapestries which obviously hid an alcove across the corridor. So Othman had lied when he said no guard would be placed to watch him. Gordon instantly considered himself absolved of any implied agreement to remain in the chamber.

"Wine of Shiraz, *sahib*, and food," Musa indicated, unnecessarily. "Presently a girl beautiful as a *houri* shall be sent to entertain the *sahib*."

Gordon opened his mouth to decline, when he realized that the girl would be sent anyway, to spy on him, so he nodded acquiescingly.

Musa motioned the slave to set down the food, and he himself tasted each dish and sipped liberally of the wine, before bowing himself out of the room, herding the negro before him. Gordon, alert as a hungry wolf in a trap, noted that the Persian tasted the wine last, and that he stumbled slightly as he left the chamber. When the door closed behind the man, Gordon lifted the wine jug and smelled deeply of the contents. Mingled with the scent of the wine, so faint that only nostrils like his could have detected it, was an aromatic odor he recognized. It was not that of a poison, but only a nameless Oriental drug which induced deep slumber for a short time. The taster had hurried to leave the room before he was overcome. Gordon wondered if, after all, Othman planned to have him conveyed to the Garden of the Houris.

Investigation, armed by experience acquired through years of Eastern intrigues, convinced him that the food had not been tampered with, and he fell to with gusto.

He had scarcely completed the meal when the door opened again, just long enough to allow a slim, supple figure to slip through: a girl clad in gold breastplates, jewel-crusted girdle, and filmy silk trousers. She might have stepped out of the *harim* of Haroun ar Raschid. But Gordon came to his feet like a steel spring uncoiling, for he recognized her even before she lifted her filmy *yasmaq*.

“Azizun! What are you doing here?”

Her wide dark eyes were dilated with fear and excitement; her words tumbled over one another as her white fingers fluttered at his hands in a pathetically childish way.

“They stole me, one night as I walked in my father’s garden in Delhi, *sahib*.

“They carried me in a caravan of men posing as horse-traders, to Peshawar, and so through the Khyber, and at last to this city of devils, with six other girls stolen in India. Their slave caravans ply constantly under the very sight of the British. The girls are made to sit in the covered wagons, heavily veiled, and not daring to cry out for aid, for a knife is always near them, until the Khyber is passed. Beyond the Khyber none heeds the cries of a stolen woman. In India they are passed as the wives and daughters and sisters of the ‘horse-traders’. At Peshawar there is an Indian official who is in the pay of the *Batinis*. Scores of Indian girls are passed through the Khyber yearly with his aid.”

Gordon did not swear, but his thoughts were profane and murderous. It stung him to a dangerous rage to reflect that this abominable traffic had been carried on under his very nose; and it also indicated the efficiency and organization of the Ismailians.

“What’s this official’s name?” he asked grimly.

“Ditta Ram.”

“I know the swine!” A contracting of the lip muscles evidenced a ferocious satisfaction as Gordon recognized his opportunity to repay an old score. Then he came back to the present. Exposure of Ditta Ram and a knife-thrust in his fat belly in the fight that was sure to follow, was somewhere in the future. Azizun was speaking, stammering in her haste.

“I have dwelt here a month! I have almost died of shame. I have seen other girls die under torture. They have made me a ‘*houri*’ in their foul garden of Paradise. My heart almost burst when I saw you brought in among Muhammad ibn Ahmed’s swordsmen. I was watching from a tapestried doorway. While I racked my brain to get a word with you, the Master of the Girls came to send a girl to the *sahib* to coax from him his secrets, if he had any. I prevailed upon him to send me. He thinks I am your enemy. I told him you slew my brother.” She meditated for a moment over the enormity of the lie; her brother was one of Gordon’s best friends.

“Tell me, Azizun, do you know anything of Lal Singh, the Sikh?”

“Yes, *sahib!* They brought him here captive to make *a fedaui* of him, for no Sikh has yet joined the cult, and the Masters are very desirous of securing one who has power in the Punjab. But Lal Singh is a very powerful man, as the *sahib* knows, and after they reached the city and delivered him into the hands of the Arab guards, he broke free and with his bare hands slew the brother of Muhammad ibn Ahmed. Muhammad demanded his head and he is too powerful even for Othman to refuse in this matter.”

“So that’s why the Shaykh lied about Lal Singh,” muttered Gordon.

“Yes, *sahib*. Lal Singh lies in a dungeon below the palace, and tomorrow he is to be given to the Arab for torture and execution.”

Gordon’s face did not exactly change its expression, but it darkened and became sinister.

“Lead me tonight to Muhammad’s sleeping quarters,” he requested, his narrowing eyes betraying his deadly intention.

“Nay, he sleeps among his warriors, all proven swordsmen of the desert, too many even for thy blade, Prince of Swords. I will lead you to Lal Singh!”

“What of the guard hidden in the corridor?”

“There is a secret way from this room to the dungeons. He will not see us leave the chamber. And he will not open the door, or allow any one else to enter until he has seen me leave.”

She drew aside the tapestry on the wall opposite the door and pressed on an arabesqued design. A panel swung inward, revealing a narrow stair that wound down into lightless depths.

“The masters think their slaves do not know their secrets,” she muttered. “Come.” She produced and lighted a tiny candle, and holding it aloft in her slender hand she led the way onto the stair, pulling the panel to after them. They descended until Gordon estimated that they were well beneath the palace, and then struck a narrow, level tunnel which ran away from the foot of the stair.

“We are under one of the outer gardens now,” she said. “A Rajput who planned to run away from Shalizahr showed me this secret way. I planned to escape with him. We hid weapons and food here. He was caught and put to the torture, but died without betraying me. Here is the sword he hid.” She paused and fumbled in a niche, drawing out a blade which she proffered Gordon. He took it, believing that he would need such a weapon before they won clear.

A few moments later they reached a heavy, iron-bound door, and Azizun, gesturing for caution, drew Gordon to it and showed him a tiny aperture to peer through. He looked into a fairly wide corridor, flanked on one side by a blank wall in which showed a single ebon door, curiously ornate and heavily bolted, and on the other by a row of cells with barred doors. The corridor was not long. He could see each end, closed by a heavy door. Archaic bronze lamps hung at intervals cast a mellow glow.

Before one of the cell-doors stood a resplendent Arab in glittering corselet and plumed helmet, scimitar in hand. He was hawk-nosed, black-bearded, his arrogant bearing an assurance of prowess.

Azizun's fingers tightened on Gordon's arm.

"Lal Singh is in the cell before which he stands," she whispered. "Do not shoot the Arab. Slay him in silence. He has no gun and he is proud of his swordsmanship. He will not cry out until he knows he is beaten. The ring of steel will not be heard above."

Gordon tried the balance of the blade she had given him — a long Indian steel, light but well-nigh unbreakable, razor-edged for slashing, but not curved too much for thrusting. It was the same length as the Arab's scimitar.

Gordon pushed open the secret door and stepped into the corridor. He saw the bearded face of Lal Singh staring through the bars behind the Arab. Gordon had made no sound as he stepped from his hiding place, but the hidden hinges creaked, and the Arab whirled catlike, snarled with amazement, glared wildly, and then came to the attack with the instant decisiveness of a panther.

Gordon met him half-way, and the wild-eyed Sikh gripping the bars until his knuckles were bloodless, and the Indian girl crouching in the open doorway witnessed a play of swords that would have burned the blood of kings.

The only sounds were the quick, soft, sure shuffle and thud of feet, the slither and rasp of steel on steel, the breathing of the fighters. The long, light blades flickered illusively in the mellow light. They were like living things, like the tongues of serpents, darting and gleaming; like parts of the men who wielded them, welded not only to hand, but to brain as well. To the girl it was bewildering, incomprehensible. But Lal Singh, grown to manhood with a sword in his hand, realized and appreciated to the fullest the superlative skill which scintillated there in lightning intricacies, and he alternately chilled and burned with the bright splendor of the fray.

Even before the Arab, he knew when the hair-line balance shifted; sensed the inevitable outcome an instant before the Arab's lip drew back from his teeth in ferocious recognition of defeat and desperate resolve to take his enemy with him. But the end came even before

Lal Singh realized its imminence. A louder ring of blades, a flash of steel that baffled the eye which sought to follow it — Gordon's flickering blade seemed lightly to caress his enemy's neck in passing — and then the Arab was lying in his own blood on the floor, his head all but severed from him body. He had died without a cry.

Gordon stood over him for an instant, the sword in his hand stained with a thread of crimson. His shirt had been torn open and his muscular breast rose and fell easily. Only a film of perspiration which glistened there and on his brow betrayed the strain of his recent exertions.

Stooping he tore a bunch of keys from the dead man's girdle. The grate of steel in the lock seemed to awaken Lal Singh from a trance.

"Sahib! You are mad to come into this den of snakes! But who would have thought an Arab could wield such a sword! It carried me back to the old days when we matched our steel against the finest blades of the Turks!"

"Come on out." Gordon pulled open the door, and the Sikh stepped forth, light and supple as a great panther. Without a turban, and half-naked, yet his condition did not decrease the manliness of his bearing.

Gordon thought rapidly.

"We won't have a chance if we make a break before dark. Azizun, how soon will another come to relieve the man I killed?"

"They change guards every four hours in these dungeons. His watch had just begun."

"Good! That gives us four hours lee-way." He glanced at his watch and was surprized to note the hour. He had been in Shalizahr much longer than he had realized.

"Within four hours it will be sun-down. As soon as it's well dark, we'll make our break to get away. Until we're ready Lal Singh will hide on the secret stairway."

"But when the guard comes to relieve this man," said the Sikh, "it will be known that I have escaped from my cell. You should have

left me here until you were ready to go, *sahib.”*

“I didn’t dare risk it. I might not have been able to get you out when the time came. We have four hours before they’ll be likely to find you’re gone. When they do, maybe the confusion will help us. We’ll hide this body somewhere.”

He turned toward the curiously decorated door, but Azizun gasped, grasping his arm: “Not *that* way, *sahib*! Would you open the door to hell?”

“What do you mean? What lies beyond that door?”

“I do not know. The bodies of executed men and women are thrown over the edge of the plateau for the kites to devour. But through this door are carried wretches who have been tortured but still live. What becomes of them I do not know, but I have heard them scream, more terribly than they did under the torture. The girls say that a *djinn* has his lair beyond that door, and that he refuses to devour the dead, but accepts only living sacrifices.”

“That may be,” said Lal Singh skeptically. “But I saw a slave some hours ago open that door and hurl something through it which was neither a man nor a woman, though what it was I could not tell.”

“It was doubtless an infant,” she shuddered.

But Gordon was already dragging the body of the Arab into the cell and stripping it. He instructed Lal Singh to enter the cell and doff the rags left him by his captors, and he clothed the dead man in the Sikh’s garments and laid the body in the furthest corner, with his back to the door, and his gashed throat invisible to the casual glance. The Arab was not as tall as the Sikh but in the doubled-up position that fact would not be so noticeable. Lal Singh donned such of the dead man’s garments and accouterments as would fit, which did not include the helmet and corselet; these he brought with him to hide in the secret tunnel. Gordon locked the cell door behind them, and gave the keys to the Sikh.

“Nothing we can do about the blood on the floor. When the other guard comes, maybe he’ll think the Arab is you, asleep or dead, and start looking for the original guard instead of you. The longer it is

before they find you've escaped, the more time we'll have. I haven't made any definite plan about escaping from the city; that will depend on circumstances. If I find I can't get away I'll kill Othman — and the rest will be on the lap of Allah.

"In case you two make it, and I don't, try to get back along the trail and meet the Ghilzai as they come. I sent Yar Ali Khan after them. He started back at dawn. If he found the horses safe he should reach Khor shortly after nightfall. The Ghilzai should reach the canyon below the plateau sometime tomorrow morning."

They returned to the secret door, which, when closed, presented the illusion of being part of the blank stone wall, and pausing only long enough for Azizun to relight her candle, they traversed the tunnel and mounted the stair.

"Here you must hide until the time comes," said Gordon. "Take the swords, and the candle, and my electric torch. And this, too." He forced the big blue pistol on him, despite his demur.

"You'll need it before the night's over. If anything happens to me, take the girl and try to get away after dark. If neither of us comes for you within four hours, open the panel-door and make a break for it alone."

"As you will, *sahib*. It is my shame that I was taken unawares. But Yezidees stole out of the ravine like cats, and one struck me down with a stone thrown from a sling before I was aware of them, they standing back in the darkness where the devil himself could not have seen them. When I came to myself I was gagged and my arms bound behind me. In the same way, they told me, they smote down Ahmed Shah. But then they cut his throat, because these Ismailians will have nothing to do with the hill-folk, fearing such men would talk to their kin, and so betray the secret of Shalizahr. The Yezidees are like cats which steal in the dark. Nevertheless it is a great shame upon me."

And so saying he seated himself cross-legged on the top-most step and settled himself for his long vigil with the tranquillity of his race.

When Gordon and Azizun were back in the chamber, and Azizun had carefully hung the tapestry over the fake-panel, Gordon said: “You’d better go now. If you stay too long they may get suspicious. Contrive to return to me here as soon as it’s well dark. I have an idea that I’m to remain in this chamber until this fellow Bagheela returns. When you come back, tell the guard outside that the Shaykh sent you. I’ll attend to him when we’re ready to go. And by the way, they sent this drugged wine just before you left. Tell them you saw me drink it. I think I know why they sent it.”

“Yes, *sahib!* I will return after dark.” The girl was trembling with fear and excitement, but she controlled herself admirably. There was pity in Gordon’s black eyes as he watched her slender figure, carried bravely, pass through the door. Petted daughter of a rich Moslem merchant of Delhi, she was not accustomed to such treatment as she had received in Shalizahr. But she was holding herself up well.

Gordon took up the wine jug, smeared just enough wine on his lips to make a scent that would be detected by keen nostrils, then he emptied the contents in a nook behind the tapestries, and threw himself on the divan in an attitude of slumber, the jug lying on the floor near his hand.

Only a few minutes elapsed until the door opened again. A girl entered. He did not open his eyes, but he knew it was a girl by the light rustle of her bare feet on the thick carpets, and by the scent of her perfume, just as he knew by the same evidences that it was not Azizun returning. Evidently the Shaykh did not place too much trust or responsibility upon any one woman. Gordon did not believe she had been sent there to murder him — poison in the wine would have been sufficient for that purpose — so he did not take the risk of peering through slitted lids.

That the girl was afraid was evident by the quick tremor of her breathing as she bent over him. Her nostrils all but touched his lips, and he heard her sigh of relief as she thought she smelled the drugged wine on his breath. Her soft hands stole over him, searching for hidden weapons, and as she felt the empty scabbard under his left arm-pit he was glad that he had left the pistol with Lal

Singh. To keep up the deception he would have been forced to allow her to take it.

She glided away, the door closed softly, and he lay quietly. Might as well take it easy. Four hours must pass before he could make any kind of a move. Long ago he had learned to snatch food and sleep when he could. He was playing a game with Life and Death for stakes. His masquerade hung by a hair. His life and the lives of his companions depended upon his finding a way to escape from the plateau that night. He had no plan as yet; had no idea as to how they were to escape from the city and descend the cliffs. He was gambling that he would be able to find or make a way when the time came. And in the meantime he slept, as tranquilly and soundly as if he lay in the house of a friend, in the safety of his native country.

V
The Mask Falls

Like most men who live by the skin of their teeth, Gordon had acquired the knack of sleeping just so long as he wished, and waking when he chose. But he was not allowed to sleep out his four hours.

His slumber was healthy and sound, but he awoke the instant a hand touched the door. Awoke and came to his feet as Musa entered, with the inevitable salaam.

“The Shaykh Al Jebal desires your presence, *sahib*. The lord Bagheela has returned.”

So the mysterious Panther had returned sooner than the Shaykh had expected. Gordon felt a premonitory tenseness as he followed the Persian out of the chamber. A sidewise glance showed a bulge in the tapestry where he had glimpsed the helmet; the guard was still there.

Musa did not lead him back to the chamber where the Shaykh had first received him. He was conducted through a winding

corridor to a gilded door before which stood an Arab swordsman. This man opened the door, and Musa hurried Gordon across the threshold. The door closed behind them, and Gordon halted suddenly.

He stood in a broad room without windows, but with several doors. Across the chamber the Shaykh lounged on a divan with his black slaves behind him, and clustered about him were a dozen armed men of various races: Kurds, Druses and Arabs, and an Orakzai, the first Pathan Gordon had seen in Shalizahr — a hairy, ragged, scarred villain whom Gordon knew as Khuruk Khan, a thief and murderer.

But the American spared these men only the briefest sort of a glance. All his attention was fixed on the man who dominated the scene. This man stood between him and the Shaykh's divan, with the wide-legged stance of a horseman — handsome in a dark, saturnine way. He was taller than Gordon, and more wiry in build, this leanness being emphasized by his close-fitting breeches and riding boots. One hand caressed the butt of the heavy automatic which hung at his thigh, the other stroked his thin black mustache. And Gordon knew the game was up. For this was Ivan Konaszevski, a Cossack, who knew El Borak too well to be deceived as the Shaykh had been.

"This is the man," said Othman. "He desires to join us."

The man they called Bagheela the Panther smiled thinly.

"He has been playing a role. El Borak would never turn renegade. He is here as a spy for the English."

The eyes fixed on the American grew suddenly murderous. No more than Bagheela's word was necessary to convince his followers. Gordon laughed aloud, and none who heard him understood why. Ivan Konaszevski did not understand. He knew Gordon well enough to sift truth from falsehood and understood his real purpose in Shalizahr. But he did not know him well enough to understand that laugh, or to understand the dark flame that rose in the black eyes.

Gordon's laughter was not self-mockery, or of that cynicism which derides its own defeat. Under Gordon's inscrutable exterior lurked the untamed soul of a berserker. He had long learned the unwisdom of fighting except as a last resort. But now the game was up. All masks were fallen. He had done all he could with subtlety and intrigue. His back was at the wall, and fighting was all that was left for him. He could plunge into the bright madness of battle without doubts or regrets or consideration of consequences. The laughter that so amazed his enemies rose in ferocious exultation from the depths of his elemental soul. But for the moment he held himself in check; the burning flame in his eyes was all there was to warn his enemies, and they did not recognize that warning.

The Shaykh made a gesture of repudiation.

"In these matters I always defer to your judgment, Bagheela. You know the man. I do not. Do what you will. Do not fear. He is unarmed."

At the assurance of the helplessness of their prey, wolfish cruelty sharpened the faces of the warriors, and Khuruk Khan half-drew a three-foot Khyber knife from its embroidered scabbard. There was plenty of edged steel in evidence, but only the Cossack had a gun in sight.

"That will make it easier," laughed Konaszevski, then slipped into Russian which the Persian did not seem to understand. "Gordon, you were mad to come here. You should have known that you would meet someone who knew you as you really are — not as these fools think you are."

"You were the joker in the deck," admitted Gordon. "I didn't know the natives called you Bagheela. That was what trapped me. But I knew some European power must be behind this masquerade. Your masters have dreams of an Asiatic empire, do they not? So they sent you to combine forces with a fanatic; help build him a city, and make a tool out of him. They supplied the money, and European wits and weapons. What do they hope to do? Supplant each Asiatic ruler now friendly to England with a puppet to obey

their orders? Intimidate hostile sultans and pashas with the fear of assassination, to secure favorable treaties and concessions?"

"In part," admitted Konaszevski calmly. "This is but one strand in a far-flung web of imperial ambition. I will not bother to remind you that you might have a part in the coming empire if you were wise. I know your stubbornness in refusing to do anything against the interests of British rule in India, though I can not understand why. You are an American. And you are not even English by descent. Even before your ancestors crossed the Atlantic they had fought the English for centuries."

Gordon smiled bleakly.

"I care nothing for England as a nation. But India is better off under her rule than it would be under men who employ such tools as yourself. By the way, who are your masters just now? The agents of the Czar — or somebody else?"

"That will make little difference to you, shortly!" Konaszevski showed his white teeth beneath the wiry black mustache in a light laugh. Othman and his men were shifting uneasily, irked at being unable to follow the conversation. The Cossack shifted to Arabic. "Your end will be interesting to watch. They say you are as stoical as the red Indians of your country. I am curious to test that reputation. Bind him, men —"

His gesture as he reached for the automatic at his hip was leisurely. He knew Gordon was dangerous, but he had never seen the black-haired Westerner in action; he could not realize the savage quickness that lurked in El Borak's hard thews. Before the Cossack could draw his pistol Gordon sprang and struck as a panther slashes. The impact of his clenched fist was like that of a trip-hammer and Konaszevski went down, blood spurting from his jaw, the pistol slipping from its holster.

Before Gordon could snatch the weapon, Khuruk Khan was upon him. Only the Pathan realized Gordon's deadly quickness and ferocity of attack, and even he had not been swift enough to save the Cossack. But he kept Gordon from securing the pistol, for El

Borak had to whirl and grapple as the three-foot Khyber knife rose above him. Gordon caught the knife-wrist as it fell, checking the stroke in mid-air, the iron sinews springing out on his own wrist in the effort. His right hand ripped a dagger from the Pathan's girdle and sank it to the hilt under his ribs almost with the same motion. Khuruk Khan groaned and sank down dying, and Gordon wrenched away the long knife as he crumpled.

All this had happened in a stunning explosion of speed, embracing a mere tick of time. Konaszevski was down and Khuruk Khan was dying before the others could get into action, and when they did they were met by the yard-long knife in the hand of the most terrible knife-fighter North of the Khyber.

Even as he whirled to meet the rush, the long blade licked out and a Kurd went down, choking out his life through a severed jugular. An Arab shrieked, disembowelled. A Druse overreached with a ferocious dagger-lunge, and reeled away, clutching the crimson-gushing stump of a wrist.

Gordon did not put his back to the wall; he sprang into the thick of his foes, wielding his dripping knife murderously. They swirled and milled about him; he was the center of a whirlwind of blades that flickered and lunged and slashed, and yet somehow missed their mark again and again as he shifted his position constantly and so swiftly that he baffled the eye which sought to follow him. Their numbers hindered them; they cut thin air or gashed one another, confused by his speed and demoralized by the wolfish ferocity of his onslaught.

At such deadly close quarters the long knife was more effective than the scimitars and tulwars. In the hands of a man who knows how to wield it there is no more murderous weapon in the universe. And Gordon had long ago mastered its every use, whether the terrible downward swing that splits a skull, or the savage upward rip that spills out a man's entrails.

It was butcher's work, but El Borak made no false motion; he was never in doubt or confused. There was no uncertainty or hesitation

in his attack. He waded through that melee of straining bodies and lashing blades like a typhoon, and he left a red wake behind him.

The sense of time is lost in the daze of battle. In reality the melee lasted only a matter of moments, then the survivors gave back, stunned and appalled by the havoc wrought among them. El Borak wheeled, located the Shaykh who had retreated to the further wall, flanked by the stolid Sudanese — then even as Gordon's leg-muscles tensed for a leap, a shout brought him half-way around.

A group of Arab guardsmen appeared at the door opening into the corridor, levelling their rifles at him, while those in the room scurried out of the line of fire. Gordon's hesitation endured only for the fleetest tick of time, while the guns were coming to a level. In that flash of consciousness he weighed his chances of reaching the Shaykh and killing him before he himself died — knew that he would be struck in mid-air by at least half a dozen bullets, but did not hesitate to match his ferocious vitality against death itself.

And then — everything seemed to be happening at once — before Gordon could leap or the Arabs could loose their volley, a door to the right crashed inward and a blast of lead raked the ranks of the riflemen. Lal Singh! With the first crack of the big blue pistol in the Sikh's hand Gordon altered his plans from death to life. He charged the Arabs in the doorway instead of the Shaykh.

Thrown into confusion by the unexpected blast which mowed down three men and set others to staggering and crying out, the Arabs fell into demoralized confusion. Some fired wildly at the Sikh, some at Gordon as he charged them, and all missed, as is inevitable when men's attention is divided. And as they fired futilely Gordon was among them with a rush and a gigantic bound. His dripping blade spattered blood and left a wake of writhing, dripping figures behind him — then he was through the milling mob and racing down the corridor, shouting for Lal Singh as he headed to pass the corridor door of the adjoining chamber from which the Sikh had fired.

Lal Singh, the instant he saw Gordon plunge through the band of guards, slammed the bronze door between the rooms, grinning as he heard bullets flatten on the metal, then turned and rushed toward the door that opened into the corridor. But even as he reached the threshold, answering Gordon's shout, a hand came out from behind the tapestry, clutching a bludgeon. The Sikh did not see it, and his convulsive movement, as Gordon yelled warning, was too late. The cudgel crashed on his unprotected head and he reeled backward and toppled down through an aperture which opened suddenly in the floor and then closed above his falling body.

With a snarl Gordon leaped at the tapestry but his slashing blade only ripped velvet and rang on stone. Whoever had lurked there had

already withdrawn into some secret niche.

The Sikh had been precipitated — whether dead or alive — through a concealed trap door, and Gordon could not help him now. The trap was closed, and men were pouring into the corridor, firing wildly. The echoes of their shots slapped deafeningly up and down along the walls of the corridor.

Gun butts hammered on the bronze door the Sikh had slammed. Gordon slammed the door to the corridor, ran around the room, skirting the wall so as to avoid the trap in the middle of the floor, and threw open a door opposite the bronze door. He came into a narrow corridor that ran off at right angles from the main hallway. At the other end was a gold-barred window. A Kurd sprang up from an alcove, lifting a rifle. Gordon came at him like a mountain storm. Daunted by the sight of the savage, blood-stained white man, the Kurd fired without aiming, missed, and jammed the lock of his rifle. He shrieked, tore desperately at the bolt, then threw up his hands and screamed as Gordon, maddened by the fate of the Sikh, struck with murderous fury. The Kurd's head jumped from his shoulders on a spurt of crimson and thudded to the floor.

Gordon lunged at the window, hacked once at the bars with his knife, then gripped them with both hands and braced his legs. A heaving surge of iron strength, a savage wrench, and the bars came away in his hands with a splintering crash. He plunged through into a latticed balcony overlooking a garden. Behind him men were storming down the narrow corridor. Rifles cracked spitefully and lead spattered about him. He dived at the lattice-work headfirst, the knife extended before him — smashed through the flimsy material without checking his flight and hit catlike on his feet in the garden below.

The garden was empty but for half a dozen scantily-clad women who screamed and ran. He raced toward the opposite wall, quartering among the low trees to avoid the bullets that rained after him. Hot lead ripped through the branches, rattling among the leaves. A backward glance showed the broken lattice crowded with

furious faces and arms brandishing weapons. Another shout warned him of peril ahead.

A man was running along the wall, swinging a tulwar.

The fellow, a fleshily-built Kurd, had accurately judged the point where the fugitive would reach the wall, but he himself reached that point a few seconds too late. The wall was not higher than a man's head. Gordon caught the coping with one hand and swung himself up almost without checking his speed, and an instant later, on his feet on the parapet, ducked the sweep of the tulwar and drove his knife through the Kurd's huge belly.

The man bellowed like an ox in pain, threw his arms about his slayer in a death-grip, and they went over the parapet together. Gordon had only time to glimpse the sheer-walled ravine which gaped below them. They struck on its narrow lip, rolled off and fell fifteen feet to crash sickeningly on the rocky floor of that ravine. As they rushed downward Gordon turned in mid-air so that the Kurd was under him when they hit, and the fat, limp body cushioned his fall. Even so it jolted the breath out of him and left him gasping and half-stunned. Above him a rifle was poked over the wall.

VI

The Haunter of the Gulches

Gordon staggered to his feet, empty handed, glaring in hypnotic fascination at the black ring that was the rifle muzzle trained full upon him. Behind it a bearded face froze in a yellow-fanged grin of murder.

Then a hand dragged aside the barrel as the wall was lined with turbaned heads. The man who had struck up the rifle barrel laughed and pointed down the ravine, and the man with the gun hesitated, and then grinned malevolently. Gordon scowled up at the row of bearded faces that looked down at him, all grinning as if at a grim jest. Some laughed derisively, and others shouted replies to questions hurled by some unseen party.

Gordon stood motionless, unable to comprehend the attitude of his enemies. When he rose to face that rifle he had expected nothing but an instant blast of lead; but the warriors had not fired, and seemingly had no intention of firing.

Another countenance appeared above him — a blood-stained face, adorned with a black mustache. Konaszevski was rather pale under his dark skin, and his expression was no less malignant.

“Out of the frying pan into the fire, as you damned Americans say,” he laughed viciously. “Well, I had other plans for you” — he dabbed with a bit of silk at the cut on his chin — “but this suits me well enough. I leave you to your meditations. You are no longer important enough to take up my time, and I certainly have no intention of allowing you to be put out of misery with a merciful rifle-shot. Farewell, dead man!”

And with a brusk word to his followers, he disappeared. The turbans vanished from the parapet like apples rolled off a wall, and Gordon stood alone except for the dead man sprawling near his feet.

Gordon frowned as he looked suspiciously about him. He knew that the southern end of the plateau was cut up into a network of ravines, and obviously he was in one which ran out of that network to the south of the palace. It was a straight gulch, like a giant knife-cut, thirty feet in width, which ran out of a maze of gullies straight toward the city, ceasing abruptly at a sheer cliff of solid stone below the garden wall from which he had fallen. This cliff was fifteen feet in height and too smooth to be wholly the work of nature.

Ten feet from the end-wall, the ravine deepened abruptly, the rocky floor falling away some five feet. He stood on a kind of natural shelf at the end of the ravine. The side-walls were sheer, showing evidences of having been smoothed by tools. Across the rim of the wall at the end, and for fifteen feet on each side, ran a strip of iron with short razor-edged blades slanting down. They had not cut him as he fell over them, but anyone trying to climb the wall, even if he reached the rim by some miracle, would be gored to pieces trying to swarm up over them. The strips on the side walls

overreached the edge of the shelf below, and beyond that point the walls were more than twenty feet in height. Gordon was in a prison, partly natural, partly man-made.

Looking down the ravine he saw that it widened and broke into a tangle of smaller gulches, separated by ridges of solid stone, beyond and above which he saw the gaunt bulk of the mountain looming up. The other end of the ravine was not blocked in any way, but he knew that his captors would not use so much care in safeguarding one end of his prison while allowing some avenue of escape at the other. But it was not his nature to resign himself to whatever fate they had planned for him. Obviously they thought they had him safely trapped; but other men had thought that before.

He pulled the knife out of the Kurd's carcass, wiped off the blood and went down the ravine.

A hundred yards from the city-end, he came to the mouths of the smaller ravines, selected one at random, and immediately found himself in a nightmarish labyrinth. Channels hollowed in the almost solid rock meandered bafflingly though a crumbling waste of stone. Mostly they ran roughly north and south, but they merged with one another, split apart, and looped in crisscross chaos. Most of them seemed to begin without reason and to go nowhere. He was forever coming to the ends of blind alleys which, if he surmounted them, it was only to descend into another equally confusing branch of the insane network.

Sliding down a gaunt ridge his heel crunched something that broke with a dry crack. He had stepped upon the dried rib-bones of a headless skeleton. A few yards away lay the skull, crushed and splintered. He began to stumble upon similar grisly relics with appalling frequency. Each skeleton showed broken bones and a smashed skull. The action of the elements could not have had that destructive an effect. He went more warily, narrowly eyeing every spur of rock or shadowed recess. But he saw no tracks in the few sandy places where a track would have shown that would indicate the presence of any of the large carnivora. In one such place he did indeed come upon a partially effaced track, but it was not the spoor

of a leopard, bear or tiger. It looked more like the print of a bare, misshapen human foot. And the bones had not been gnawed as they would have been in the case of a man-eater. They showed no tooth-marks; they seemed simply to have been crushed and broken, as an incredibly powerful man might have broken them. But once he came upon a rough out-jut of rock to which clung strands of coarse grey hair that might have been rubbed off against the stone, and here and there an unpleasant rank odor which he could not define hung in the cave-like recesses beneath the ridges where a beast — or man, or demon! — might conceivably curl up and sleep.

Baffled and balked in his efforts to steer a straight course through the stony maze, he scrambled up a weathered ridge which looked to be higher than most, and crouching on its sharp angle, stared out over the nightmarish waste. His view was limited except to the north, but the glimpses he had of sheer cliffs rising above the spurs and ridges to east, west and south, made him believe that they formed parts of a continuous wall which enclosed the tangle of gullies. To the north this wall was split by the ravine which ran to the outer palace garden.

Presently the nature of the labyrinth became evident. At one time or another a section of that part of the plateau which lay between the site of the present city and the mountain had sunk, leaving a great bowl-like depression, and the surface of the depression had been cut up into gullies by the action of the elements over an immense period of time. There was no use wasting time wandering about in the midst of the gulches. His problem was to make his way to the cliffs that hemmed in the corrugated bowl, and skirt them, to find if there was any way to surmount them. Looking southward he believed he could trace the route of a ravine which was more continuous than the others, and which ran in a more or less direct route to the base of the mountain whose sheer wall hung over the bowl. He also saw that to reach this ravine he would save time by returning to the gulch below the city wall and following another one of the ravines which debouched into it, instead of scrambling over a

score or so of knife-edged ridges which lay between him and the gully he wished to reach.

With this purpose in mind he climbed down the ridge and retraced his steps. The sun was swinging low as he re-entered the mouth of the outer ravine, and started toward the gulch he believed would lead him to his objective. He glanced idly toward the cliff at the other end of the wider ravine — and stopped dead in his tracks. The body still lay on the shelf — but it was not lying in the same position in which he had left it — it did not seem so bulky, and the garments looked different. An instant later he was racing along the ravine, springing up on the shelf, bending over the motionless figure. The Kurd he had killed was gone; the man who lay there was Lal Singh!

There was a great lump, clotted with blood, on the back of his head, but the Sikh was not dead. Even as Gordon lifted his head, he blinked dazedly, lifted a hand to his wound, and stared blankly at Gordon.

"Sahib! What has happened? Are we dead and in Hell?"

"In Hell, perhaps, but not dead. Do you have any idea how you came here?"

The Sikh sat up dizzily, holding his head in his hands. He stared about him in amazement.

"Where are we?"

"In a ravine behind the palace. Do you remember being thrown in here?"

"No, *sahib*. I remember the fight in the palace; nothing thereafter. As I waited in the darkness on the hidden stair, the girl Azizun came in haste and said you had been confronted by a man who knew you. She led me to the chamber adjoining that one in which you were fighting, and I used your pistol to some advantage, as I remember. I was running to the outer door to join you — then something happened. I do not know. I do not remember anything."

"A fedaui hiding among the tapestries knocked you in the head," grunted Gordon. "Doubtless saw you enter the chamber and sneaked in after you and hid in a secret alcove. The palace seems to be full of them. He slugged you and pulled a rope to open a trap in the floor for you to fall through. I got over a garden wall and fell into this infernal ravine, with a dead Kurd. Evidently while I was exploring down the ravine they took his body out and threw you down here.

"Wait a minute, though! You weren't thrown. You'd have broken bones, probably a broken neck. They might have come down on ladders, and hoisted the Kurd up, but they certainly wouldn't take the trouble to ease you down gently. There's only one alternative. They shoved you through some kind of door in the cliff somewhere."

A few minutes careful searching disclosed the door whose existence he suspected. The thin cracks which advertised its presence would have escaped the casual glance. The door on that side was of the same material as the cliff, and fitted perfectly. It did not yield a particle as both men thrust powerfully upon it.

Gordon marshalled his scraps of knowledge concerning the architecture of the palace, and his eyes narrowed at the conclusion he reached, though he said nothing to the Sikh. He believed that they were looking on the outer side of that curiously decorated door beneath the palace against which Azizun had warned him. The door to Hell! Then he and Lal Singh were in "Hell," and those splintered bones he had seen lent a sinister confirmation to the legend of a *djinn* which devoured humans — though he did not believe the owners of those bones had been literally devoured. But *something* inimical to human beings haunted that maze of ravines. He abandoned all thought of breaking in the door, as he remembered its heavy, metal-bound material and powerful bolts. It would take a company of men with a battering ram to shake that door.

He turned and looked down the gully toward the mysterious labyrinth, wondering what skulking horror its mazes hid. The sun had not yet set, but it was hidden from the gulches; the ravine was

full of shadows, though visibility had not yet been appreciably affected.

"The walls are high here," muttered the Sikh, pressing his hands to his throbbing head. "But they are higher further along the ravine. If you stood on my shoulders and leaped —"

"I'd cut my hands off on those blades."

"Oh!" The cobwebs were clearing from the Sikh's brain. "I did not notice. What shall we do, then?"

"Cross that maze of gulches and see what lies beyond it. You know nothing of what became of Azizun, of course?"

"She was running ahead of me until we came to the chamber whence I fired your pistol. I supposed she followed me as I rushed past her into that chamber. But I did not see after I entered it."

"The *fedaui* who slugged you must have grabbed her and shoved her into some secret compartment," growled Gordon, veins swelling slightly on his neck. "Damn them, they'll torture and kill her — we've got to get out of here. Come on."

A mystical blue twilight hovered over the gulches as Lal Singh and Gordon entered the labyrinth. Threading among winding channels they came out into a slightly wider gully which Gordon believed was the one he had seen from the ridge, and which ran to the south wall of the bowl. But they had not gone fifty yards when it split on a sharp-edged spur into two narrower gorges. This division had not been visible from the ridge, and Gordon did not know which branch to follow. He decided that the two branches merely ran past the narrow spur, one on each side, and joined again further on. When he spoke his belief to the Sikh, Lal Singh said: "Yet one may be but a blind alley, instead. You take the right branch, and I will take the left, and we will explore them separately."

And before Gordon could stop him, he was off, half-running down the left hand ravine, and passed out of sight almost instantly. Gordon started to call him back, then stiffened without shouting. Ahead of him, on the right, the mouth of a yet narrower ravine opened into the right-hand gorge, a well of blue shadows. And in

that well *something* moved. Gordon tensed rigidly, staring unbelievingly at the monstrous man-like being which stood in the twilight before him.

It was like the embodied spirit of this nightmare country, a ghoulish incarnation of a terrible legend, clad in flesh and bone and blood.

The creature was a giant ape, as tall on its gnarled legs as a gorilla. But the shaggy hair which covered it was of a strange ashy grey, longer and thicker than the hair on a gorilla. Its feet and hands were more man-like, the great toes and thumbs more like those of the human than of the anthropoid. It was no arboreal creature, but a beast bred on great plains and barren mountains. The face was gorilloid in general appearance, but the nose-bridge was more pronounced, the jaw less bestial, though there was no chin. But its man-like features merely served to increase the dreadfulness of its aspect, and the intelligence which gleamed from its small red eyes was wholly malignant.

Gordon knew it for what it was: the monster whose existence even he had refused to credit, the beast named in myth and legend of the north — the Snow-Ape, the Desert Man of forbidden Mongolia. He had heard rumors of its existence many times, in wild tales drifting down from a lost, bleak plateau-country of the Gobi never explored by white men. Tribesmen had sworn to the stories of a man-like beast which had dwelt there since time immemorial, adapted to the famine and bitter chill of the northern uplands. But Gordon had never seen a man who could prove he had seen one of the brutes.

But here was indisputable proof. How the nomads who served Othman had managed to bring the monster from Mongolia Gordon could not guess, but here was the *djinn* which haunted the ravines behind mysterious Shalizahr.

All this flashed through Gordon's mind in the moment the two stood facing each other, man and beast, in menacing tenseness. Then the rocky walls of the ravine echoed to the ape's deep sullen

roar as it charged, low-hanging arms swinging wide, yellow fangs bared and dripping.

Gordon did not shout to his companion. Lal Singh was unarmed. Nor did he try to flee. He waited, poised on the balls of his feet, craft and long knife pitted against the brute strength of the mighty ape.

The monster's victims had been given to it broken and shattered from the torture that only an Oriental knows how to inflict. The semi-human spark in its brain which set it apart from the true beasts had found a horrible exultation in the death agonies of its prey. This man was only another weak creature to be torn and twisted and dismembered, even though he stood upright and held a gleaming thing in his hand.

Gordon, as he faced that onrushing death, knew his only chance was to keep out of the grip of those huge arms which could crush him in an instant. The monster was clumsy but swift, as it rolled over the ground, and it hurled itself through the air for the last few feet in a giant grotesque spring. Not until it was looming over him, the great arms closing upon him, did Gordon move, and then his shift would have shamed a striking catamount.

The talon-like nails only shredded his shirt as he sprang clear, slashing as he sprang, and a hideous scream ripped the echoes shuddering through the ridges; the ape's arm fell to the ground, shorn away at the elbow. With blood spouting from the severed stump the brute whirled and rushed again, and this time its desperate lunge was too lightning-quick for any human thews wholly to avoid.

Gordon evaded the disembowelling sweep of the great misshapen hand with its thick black nails, but the massive shoulder struck him and knocked him staggering. He was carried to the wall with the lunging brute, but even as he was swept backward he drove his knife to the hilt in the great belly and ripped up in the desperation of what he believed was his dying stroke.

They crashed together into the wall, and the ape's great arm hooked terribly about Gordon's straining frame; the roar of the beast deafened him as the foaming jaws gaped above his head — then they snapped spasmodically in empty air as a great shudder shook the mighty body. A frightful convulsion hurled the American clear, and he bounded up to see the ape thrashing in its death throes at the foot of the wall. His desperate upward rip had disembowelled it and the tearing blade had ploughed up through muscle and bone to find the fierce heart of the anthropoid.

Gordon's corded thews were quivering as if from a long-sustained strain. His iron-hard frame had resisted the terrible strength of the ape long enough to permit him to come alive out of that awful grapple that would have torn a weaker man to pieces; but the terrific exertion had shaken even him. Shirt and undershirt had been ripped from him and those horny-taloned fingers had left bloody marks deep-grooved across his back. He was smeared and stained with blood, his own and the ape's.

"El Borak! *El Borak!"* It was Lal Singh's voice lifted in frenzy, and the Sikh burst out of the left-hand ravine, a rock in each hand, and his bearded face livid.

His eyes blazed at the sight of the ghastly thing at the foot of the wall; then he had seized Gordon in a desperate grasp.

"Sahib! Are you slain? You are covered with blood! Where are your wounds?"

“In the ape’s belly,” grunted Gordon, twisting free. Emotional display embarrassed him. “It’s his blood, not mine.”

Lal Singh sighed with gusty relief, and turned to stare wide-eyed at the dead monster.

“What a blow! You ripped him wide open so his guts fell out! Not ten men now alive in the world could strike such a blow. It is the *djinn* of which the girl warned us! And an ape! The beast the Mongols call the Desert Man.”

“Yes. I never believed the tales about them before. Scientific expeditions have tried to find them, but the natives in that part of the Gobi always ran the white men out.”

“Perhaps there are others,” suggested Lal Singh, peering sharply about in the gathering dusk. “It will soon be dark. It will not be well to meet such a fiend in these dark ravines after nightfall.”

“I don’t think. His roars could have been heard all through these gulches. If there had been another, it would have come to his aid, or sounded an answering roar, at least.”

“I heard the bellowing,” said Lal Singh fervently. “The sound turned my blood to ice, for I believed it was in truth a *djinn* such as the superstitious Moslems speak of. I did not expect to find you alive.”

Gordon spat, aware of thirst.

“Well, let’s get moving. We’ve rid the ravines of their haunter, but we can still die of hunger and thirst if we don’t get out. Come on.”

Dusk masked the gullies and hung over the ridges, as they moved off down the right-hand ravine. Forty yards further on the left-hand branch ran back into its brother, as Gordon had believed to be the case. As they advanced, the walls were more thickly pitted with cave-like lairs, in which the rank scent of the ape hung strong. Gordon scowled and Lal Singh swore at the numbers of skeletons which littered the gulch, which evidently had been the monster’s favorite stamping ground. Most of them were of women, and as Gordon viewed those pitiful remnants, a relentless and merciless rage grew redly in his brain. All that was violent in his nature, ordinarily held under iron control, was roused to ferocious wakefulness by the realization of the horror and agony those helpless women had suffered, and in his own soul he sealed the doom of Shalizahr and the human fiends who ruled it. It was not his nature to swear oaths or vow loud vows. He did not speak his mind even to Lal Singh; but his intention to wipe out that nest of vultures in the interests of the world at large took on the tinge of a personal blood-feud, and his determination fixed like iron never to leave the

plateau until he had looked upon the dead bodies of Ivan Konaszevski and the Shaykh Al Jebal.

The loom of the mountain was now above them, in tiers of giant cliffs, rising precipitously above the rim of the bowl which enclosed the sunken labyrinth. The ravine they were following ran into a cleft in the wall of this bowl, beneath the mountain. It became a tunnel-like cavern, receding under the mountain like a well of blackness. There was despair in the Sikh's voice as he spoke.

"Sahib, it is a prison from which there is no escape. We can not climb the rim that hems in this depression of gulches. And this cave —"

"Wait!" Gordon's iron fingers bit into the Sikh's arm in sudden excitement. They were standing in utter darkness, some yards inside the cave-mouth. He had glimpsed something far down that black tunnel — something that shone like a firefly. But it was steady, not intermittent. It cut through the blackness like a stationary spark of light.

"Come on!" Releasing the Sikh's arm Gordon hurried down the cavern, chancing a plunge into a pit or a meeting in the dark with some grim denizen of the underworld. He knew what he saw was a star, shining through some cleft in the mountain wall.

As they advanced a faint light illuminated the darkness ahead of them, and presently they saw the cave ended at a blank wall; but in that wall, some ten feet from the floor, there was hole and through it they saw the star and a bit of velvet night-sky. Without a word the Sikh bent his back, gripping his legs above the knees to brace himself, and Gordon climbed onto his shoulders and stood upright, his fingers grasping the rim of the roughly circular cleft. It was four or five feet long, and just big enough for a man to squeeze through. The ape might conceivably have reached it, but he could not have forced his great shoulders through it. Gordon did not believe the masters of Shalizahr knew of that opening.

He wriggled to the other end of the tunnel-like cleft, and peered over the rim. He was looking down on the western flank of the

mountain. The hole was a crevice in a cliff which sloped down for three hundred feet, broken by rocks and ledges. He could not see the plateau; a marching row of broken pinnacles rose gauntly between it and his point of vantage. Crawling back, he dropped down inside the cave beside the eager Sikh.

"Is it a way of escape, *sahib*?"

"For you. Lal Singh, you've got to go and meet Yar Ali Khan and the Ghilzai. I'm gambling on the chance that he reached Khor and will be back at the outer gates of Shalizahr by sunrise tomorrow. According to my estimate there are at least five hundred fighting men in Shalizahr. Baber Khan's three hundred can't take the city in a direct attack. They might surprize the guard at the cleft as I did, might even force their way up the Stair. But to cross the plateau on foot, in the teeth of five hundred rifles under Ivan's command, would be suicide.

"You've got to meet them before they get to the plateau. I think you can do it. When you've squirmed through this hole and climbed down the slope outside, you'll be outside the ring of crags which surrounds Shalizahr. The only way through those crags is by the cleft through which we came to the plateau. The Ghilzai will come through that cleft. You'll have to stop them in the canyon the Assassins call the Gorge of the Kings, if at all. To get there you'll have to skirt the ring of crags, and follow around their western slopes until you hit the canyon. It'll be rough going, and you may have trouble getting down the cliffs that wall the canyon when you get there. But you'll have all night to make the trip in."

"And you, *sahib?"*

"I'm coming to that. If you get to the Gorge of the Kings before the Ghilzai come, hide and wait for them. If they've already passed through the cleft — you can read their sign — follow them as fast as you can. In any event, see that Baber Khan follows this plan of action: let him take fifty men and make a demonstration against the Stair. If they can climb the ramps and take cover in the boulders at the head of the Stair, so much the better. If not, let them climb the

surrounding crags and start shooting at everything in sight on the plateau. The idea is to create a diversion to attract the attention of the men in the city, and if possible to draw them all to the Stair. If they advance down into the canyon, let Baber Khan and his fifty retreat among the crags.

"Meanwhile, do you and Yar Ali Khan lead the rest of the Ghilzai back the way you'll traverse in reaching the Gorge of Kings. Bring them up that slope and through this cleft and down that ravine where the door in the rock opens into the dungeons under the palace."

"But what of you?"

"My part will be to open that door for you — from the inside."

"But this is madness! You can not get back into the city; and if you did, they would flay you alive. But you can not open that door."

"Another will open it for me. That ape didn't eat the wretches thrown to him. He wasn't carnivorous. No ape is. He had to be fed vegetables, or nuts, or roots or something. You saw a man open that door and throw something out. Undoubtedly, it was a bundle of food. They fed it through that door, and they must have fed it regularly. It wasn't gaunt, by any means.

"I'm gambling that door will be opened tonight. When it opens, I'm going through it. I've got to. They've got Azizun somewhere in that hellish palace, and only Allah knows what they're doing to her. Now you go in a hurry. When you get back into the bowl with the Ghilzai, hide them among the gulches and come down the ravine to the door with three or four men. Tap a few times on it with your rifle-butt. That door will be opened whether I'm alive or dead — if I have to come back from Hell and open it. Once in the palace, we'll make a shambles of Othman and his dogs."

The Sikh lifted his hand in protest and opened his mouth — then shrugged his shoulders fatalistically and silently acquiesced.

Gordon squatted and the Sikh climbed on his shoulders and stood upright, steadying himself with outstretched hands against the wall. Gordon gripped his ankles with both hands and rose to an upright

posture without the aid of his arms, using only his leg muscles to lift himself and the tall man on his shoulders — a feat impossible to most men besides trained acrobats.

In the cleft Lal Singh turned and looked down at his friend.

"What if none comes with food for the beast, and the door is not opened tonight?"

"Then I'll cut off the ape's head and throw it over the wall. They'll open the door then, to see why I'm still alive. Maybe they'll take me into the palace to torture me when they learn I've killed their goblin. Once let me get in there, even if in chains, and I'll find a way to trick them.

"Here!" Gordon tossed up the long knife. "You may need this."

"But if you wish to cut off the ape's head —"

"I'll saw it off with a sliver of sharp rock — or gnaw it off with my teeth! Get going, confound it!"

"The gods protect you," muttered the Sikh, and vanished. Gordon heard a clawing and scrambling that marked his course through the cleft, and then pebbles began rattling down the sloping cliff outside.

VII
Death Stalks the Palace

Gordon groped his way back through the cavern, and when he came into the comparative light of the gulches, he ran, fleetly and sure-footedly, until he came into the outer ravine and saw the wall and the cliff and the shelf of rock at the other end. The lights of Shalizahr glowed in the sky above the wall, and he could catch the weird melody of whining native citherns. A woman's voice was lifted in a plaintive song. He smiled grimly at the dark, skeleton-littered gorges about him. So might the lords of Nineveh and Babylon and Susa have revelled, heedless of the captives screaming and writhing and dying in the pits beneath their palaces — ignorant of the red destruction predestined at the maddened hands of those captives.

There was no food on the rocky shelf before the door. He had no way of knowing how often the brute had been fed, and whether it would be fed that night. That it had not been fed he could see, and he believed that food would be put out for it soon. Many hours had elapsed since the Sikh had seen that door opened.

He must gamble with chance, as he so often had. The thought of what might even then be happening to the girl Azizun made him sweat with fear for her, and maddened him with impatience. But he flattened himself against the rock on the side against which he knew the door opened, and waited. In his youth he had learned the patience of the red Indian which transcends even the patience of the East. For an hour he stood there, scarcely moving a muscle. A statue could hardly have stood more immobilely.

Even his patience was wearing thin when without warning there came a rattle of chains, and the door opened a crack.

Someone was peering out, to be sure the grisly guardian of the gorges was not near, before the door was fully opened. More bolts clanged and a Tajik stepped out of the opening door. He bore a great iron platter of vegetables and nuts, and he sounded a weird call as he set it down. And as he bent Gordon struck a hammer-like blow to the back of his neck. The Tajik went down without a sound and lay still, head lolling on a broken neck.

That blow with a clenched fist had been without warning, but mercy was wasted on any rogue of Shalizahr. Gordon peered through the open door and saw that the corridor, lighted by the bronze lamps, was empty; the barred cells stood vacant. Hurriedly he dragged the Tajik down the ravine and concealed the body among some broken rocks, appropriating the dagger the man wore.

Then he returned and entered the corridor. He shut the door and hesitated over shooting the bolts. He finally decided to do so, because someone would be sure to pass that way before the night was over, and suspicion would be aroused and the door bolted anyway. Dagger in hand he started toward the secret door that opened into the tunnel which led to the hidden stair. His plan was

clear in his mind. He meant to find Azizun if she were still alive, bring her with him to the tunnel and hide there until Lal Singh led his warriors up the ravine. Then he would open the door, and lead them against the men of Shalizahr, and the outcome thereafter would be as Allah willed and cold steel decided.

Or if hiding in the tunnel was not feasible, he might barricade himself and the girl in the corridor and hold it until the Ghilzai came. He was acting and planning all along as if their coming was a certainty. Of course there was always the chance that they would not come; that Yar Ali Khan had been unable to get through to Khor. But Gordon was nothing if not a gambler. And he was staking his life on the chance that the Afridi had gotten through.

The secret door was in the left wall, near the end of the passage, where there was another door, undisguised. He had not reached his objective when this door opened suddenly and a man stepped into the corridor. It was an Arab and as he sighted Gordon his breath hissed between his teeth and he reached for a heavy revolver which hung at his thigh.

But Gordon's hand darted back with the dagger, poised for a throw. The Arab froze, pallor tingeing his skin under his black beard. He had no illusions about the situation with which he found himself confronted. His hand gripped the pistol butt, but he knew that before he could draw and fire that dagger would flash through the air and transfix him, hurled by an arm whose force and accuracy was famed throughout the Hills. Gingerly he spread his fingers wide, drew his hand away from the gun and lifted both arms in token of surrender.

With a stride Gordon reached him, jerked the pistol from its scabbard and jammed the muzzle in the Arab's belly.

"Where is the Indian girl, Azizun?"

"In a dungeon beyond the door through which I just came."

"Are there other guards?"

"Nay, by Allah! I am the only one."

“All right. Turn around and march back through that door. Don’t try any tricks.”

“Allah forbid!”

The man pushed open the door with his foot and stepped through, moving as carefully as if treading on the edges of naked razors. They came into another corridor which turned sharply to the left, disclosing rows of cells on each side, apparently empty.

“She is in the last cell on the right,” the Arab murmured, and then grunted convulsively an instant later as they halted before the barred door. The cell was empty. There was another door in that cell, opposite the one before which they stood, and that door stood open.

“You lied to me,” said Gordon softly, jamming the gun-muzzle savagely into the Arab’s back. “I’ll kill you!”

“Allah be my witness!” panted the man, shaking with terror. “She was here.”

“They have taken her away,” spoke an unexpected voice.

Gordon wheeled, wrenching the Arab around with him so the man stood between him and the direction from which the voice came, with the American’s gun trained over his shoulder.

Bearded faces crowded the grille of the opposite cell. Lean hands gripped the bars. Gordon recognized the prisoners. They glared silently at him with poisonous hate burning in their eyes.

Gordon stepped toward the door, dragging his prisoner.

“You were *faithful fedauis,”* he commented. “Why are you locked in a cell?”

Yusuf ibn Suleiman spat toward him.

“Because of you, *Melikani* dog! You surprized us on the Stair, and the Shaykh sentenced us to die, even before he learned you were a spy. He said we were either knaves or fools to be caught off guard as you caught us, so at dawn we die under the knives of Muhammad ibn Ahmed’s slayers, may Allah curse him and you!”

“Yet you will attain Paradise,” he reminded them, “because you have faithfully served the Shaykh Al Jebal.”

“May the dogs gnaw the bones of the Shaykh Al Jebal,” they replied with whole-hearted venom. “Wouldst that thou and the Shaykh were chained together in Hell!”

Gordon reflected that Othman had fallen far short of obtaining such allegiance as was boasted by his ancestors, for whom their followers gladly slew themselves at command.

He had taken a bunch of keys from the girdle of the guard, and now he weighed them contemplatively in his hand. The eyes of the Kurds fixed upon them with the aspect of men in Hell who look upon an open door.

“Yusuf ibn Suleiman,” he said abruptly, “your hands are stained with many crimes. But the violation of a sworn oath is not among them. The Shaykh has abandoned you — cast you from his service. You are no longer his men, you Kurds. You owe him no allegiance.”

Yusuf’s eyes were those of a wolf.

“Could I but send him to Jehannum ahead of me,” he muttered, “I’d die happy.”

All stared tensely at Gordon, sensing a purpose behind his words.

“Will you swear, each man by the honor of his clan, to follow me and serve me until vengeance is accomplished, or death releases you from the vow?” he asked, placing the keys behind him so as not to seem to be flaunting them too flagrantly before helpless men. “Othman will give you nothing but the death of a dog. I offer you revenge and an opportunity to die honorably.”

Yusuf’s eyes blazed in response to a wild surge of hope, and his sinewy hands quivered as they grasped the bars.

“Trust us!” was all he said, but it spoke volumes.

“Aye, we swear!” clamored the men behind him. “Hearken, El Borak, we swear, each of us by the honor of his clan!”

He was turning the key in the lock before they finished swearing; wild, cruel, turbulent, treacherous according to the western

standard, they had their code of honor, those fierce mountaineers, and it was not so far different from the code of his own Highland ancestors that he did not understand it.

Tumbling out of the cell they instantly laid hold of the Arab, shouting: “Slay him! He is one of Muhammad ibn Ahmed’s dogs!”

Gordon tore the man from their grasp, handling the attackers ruthlessly; he dealt the most persistent a buffet that stretched him on the floor, but did not seem to arouse any particular resentment in his savage bosom.

“Have done! Are you men or wolves?”

He thrust the cowering Arab before him down the corridor and back into the passage which opened on the ravine, followed by the Kurds who, having sworn their allegiance, followed blindly and asked no questions. Back in the other corridor, Gordon ordered the Arab to strip, and the man did, shivering in fear of instant death, and fearful that the command indicated torture.

“Change clothes with him,” was Gordon’s next command, directed at Yusuf ibn Suleiman, and the fierce Kurd obeyed without a word. Then at Gordon’s direction, the others bound and gagged the Arab and thrust him through the secret door, which Gordon opened, and into the tunnel.

Yusuf ibn Suleiman stood up in the plumed helmet, striped *khalat* and baggy silk trousers of the Arab, and his features were sufficiently Semitic to fool anyone who was expecting to see an Arab in that garb.

“I am placing upon you the trust of a great responsibility,” said Gordon abruptly. “It is the due of a brave man. Some time, it may be by dawn, and it may be by another nightfall, or even another dawn, men will come and knock on that bolted door which opens upon the ravine of the *djinn*. They will be Ghilzai riflemen, led by Lal Singh and Yar Ali Khan. This is your part: to hide in this tunnel and open the door when they come. You have the Arab’s scimitar; when another guard comes to relieve the one who lies bound there, kill him and hide his body. If yet another comes before Lal Singh,

slay him likewise. They will not know you from one of their comrades until you strike."

From the way the Kurd's eyes blazed, Gordon knew he would not fail in that part of the plot, at least.

"It may be no slaying will be necessary," he qualified. "When the next guard comes, he will see that the prisoners have escaped, and he may not enter this corridor at all. If more than one man comes, hide in the tunnel. It may be we shall have returned before any comes. I take five men with me to look for the girl Azizun. If it is possible, I shall return here with her, and we will bolt the doors and hold this corridor against the men of Othman until Lal Singh comes. But if I do not return, I trust you to remain here, in hiding or holding the corridor by the edge of your sword, and open that door for my warriors when they come."

"The Ghilzai will slay me when I open the door to them!"

"Before you open the door, call out to Lal Singh and say 'El Borak bids you remember the wolves of Jagai.' He will know by that word that he can trust you. Where did the Ismailians take the girl?"

"Shortly after the Arab dog passed on his tour of the cells, men opened the door at the other end of her dungeon and dragged her away. They told her they were taking her to the Shaykh to be questioned by him. He will speak with her in the room where he first received you. But six men can not fight their way through the twenty Persians which stand guard before the door."

"Do you know the entrance to the garden of Paradise?"

"Aye!" A general nodding of heads showed him that Othman's mysteries were certainly not such absolute enigmas as had been those of his ancestor, the location of whose mystic gardens not even *his fedauis* had known.

"Then lead me there." And Gordon turned away, with his whole chance of success, and life itself, depending on the mere word of a savage who had been born and raised in the conviction that slaughter, rapine and treachery are the natural and proper attributes of a man's life. There was nothing to keep Yusuf ibn Suleiman from

hurrying to the Shaykh as soon as Gordon's back was turned, to buy his life by betraying the American, and later arranging a trap for Lal Singh and the Ghilzai to walk into — nothing but the primitive honor of a man who knew he was trusted by another man of honor.

Gordon and his Kurds groped through the tunnel and up the stair. The chamber where he had slept was empty. But on the stair, just inside the masked panel he found the two swords where Lal Singh had left them when he charged, pistol in hand, to Gordon's aid, forgetting the steel in his haste, and with them he armed two of his followers. The dagger he had taken from the Tajik went to another.

The corridor outside the chamber was empty. The Kurds took the lead there. With nightfall the atmosphere of silence and mystery had increased over the palace of the Shaykh Al Jebal. The lights burned more dimly; shadows hung thickly, and no breeze stole in to rustle the dully shimmering tapestries. Gordon's boots made no more sound on the thick rugs than did the bare feet of the Kurds.

They knew the way well enough; a ragged and disreputable-looking gang, with furtive feet and blazing eyes, they stole swiftly along the dim, richly-adorned hallways, like a band of midnight thieves. They kept to passages little frequented at that time of night, and they had encountered no one, when, passing through a cunningly masked door, they came suddenly to another door, gilded and barred, before which stood two giant black Sudanese with naked tulwars. Gordon had time to reflect that here was the main weakness of Othman's reign; the entrance to Paradise was too accessible; its mystery not impressive enough.

The Sudanese knew these men were unauthorized invaders, however. They did not shout a warning as they lifted their tulwars; they were mutes. Gordon did not dare chance a shot, but his pistol was not needed. Eager to begin the work of vengeance, the Kurds swarmed on the two blacks, the two men with swords engaging them while the others grappled and dragged them down — stabbed them to death in a straining, sweating, swearing knot of convulsing effort and agony. It was butcher's work, but it was a matter of grim

necessity, and pity for those tongueless murderers was emotion wasted.

“Keep watch here at the door,” he commanded one of the Kurds, and then Gordon threw open the door and strode out into the garden, now empty in the starlight, its blossoms glimmering whitely, its dense trees and shrubbery masses of dusky mystery. The Kurds, now armed with the tulwars of the blacks, blooded and whetted to the adventure, followed him boldly, even swaggering, as if they were walking through a common garden, instead of one which until that day they had considered, if not, as Othman hoped, Paradise itself, at least its nearest earthly equivalent. They seemed to have just realized — their perceptions sharpened by the spilt blood — that they were following El Borak, whose renown already partook of the mythical in that land of blood and mystery.

Gordon headed straight for the balcony which he knew was there, cleverly masked by the branches of trees which grew beneath it. Three of the Kurds bent their backs for him to stand upon, and in an instant he had found the window from which he and Othman had looked, and had forced it with a dagger point. The next instant he was through it, making no more noise than a panther would have made effecting the same entry.

Sounds came to him from beyond the curtain that masked the balcony-alcove — a woman sobbing in pain or terror, and the voice of Othman.

Peering through the hangings he saw the Shaykh lolling on the throne under the pearl-sewn canopy. The guards no longer stood like ebon images on either side of him. They were employed before the dais, in the middle of the floor — employed in whetting daggers and heating irons in small glowing braziers. Azizun was stretched out between them, naked, spread-eagled on the floor, her wrists and ankles lashed to pegs driven in the floor. No one else was in the room, and the bronze doors were closed and bolted.

“Tell me how the Sikh escaped from the cell,” commanded Othman.

“No! No!” gasped the girl, too terrified to withhold her pitiful reason for silence. “El Borak might suffer were I to speak.”

“Little fool! El Borak is —”

“Here!” Gordon snapped as he stepped from the alcove. The Shaykh jerked about, went livid — shrieked and toppled from the throne, sprawling on the edge of the dais. The Sudanese straightened, snarling like beasts, whipping out knives. Gordon fired from the hip and one black spun on his heel and crumpled. The other sprang toward the girl, lifting his scimitar, intent on slaying their victim before he died. Gordon’s slug caught him in mid-spring, drilling him through the temples. He slumped down almost upon the girl. Outside men were yelling and hammering at the door.

The Shaykh sprang up, babbling incoherently. His eyes were almost starting from his head as he glared at the grim, blood-stained white man and the smoking gun in his hand.

“You are not real!” he shrieked, throwing out his hand as if to ward off a dreadful apparition. “You are a dream of the *hashish!* No, no! There is blood on the floor! You were dead — they told me you had been given to the ape! But you have come back to slay me! You are a fiend! A devil, as men say! Help! Help! Guard! To me! The devil El Borak has returned to slay and destroy!”

Screaming like a mad thing Othman plunged from the dais and ran toward the door. Gordon waited until the Persian’s fingers were clawing at the bolts; then coldly, remorselessly he ripped a bullet through the man’s body. The Shaykh staggered, whirled to face his enemy and fell back against the door, shrieking his fear, until his voice was silenced forever by a bullet that crashed through his mouth and blasted his brains.

VIII
Wolves at Bay

Gordon looked down at his victim with eyes as relentless as black iron. Beyond the door the clamor was growing, and out in the

garden the Kurds were bawling to know if he were safe, and vociferously demanding permission to follow him into the palace. He shouted for them to be patient and hurriedly freed the girl, snatching up a piece of silk from a divan to wrap about her. She sobbed hysterically, clasping his neck in a frenzy mingled of fright and overpowering relief.

"Oh, *sahib*, I knew you would come! I knew you would not let them torture me! They told me you were dead, but I knew they could not kill you —"

Carrying her in his arms he strode through the balcony and handed her down through the window to the Kurds. She screamed when she saw their fierce bearded faces, but a word from Gordon soothed her, as he swung down beside her.

"And now, *effendi*?" the warriors demanded, eager to be at more desperate work, now that they were fully fired to the game at hand.

Most of this zeal resulted from a growing admiration for their leader; such men as Gordon have led hopeless armies chanting to snatch impossible victories out of the jaws of defeat.

“Back the way we came, to the tunnel where Yusuf waits.”

They started at a run across the garden, Gordon carrying the girl as if she had been a child. They had not gone forty feet when ahead of them a clang of steel vied with the din in the palace behind them. Lusty curses mingled with the clangor, a door slammed like a clap of thunder, and a figure came headlong through the shrubbery. It was the Kurd they had left on guard at the gilded door. He was swearing like a pirate and wringing blood drops from a slashed forearm.

“A score of Arab dogs are at the door!” he yelled. “Someone saw us kill the Sudanese, and ran for Muhammad ibn Ahmed! I sworded one in the belly and slammed the door in their accursed faces, but they’ll have it down in a few minutes!”

“Is there a way out of this garden that does not lead through the palace, Azizun?” asked Gordon.

“This way!” He set her down and she seized his hand and scurried toward the north wall, all but hidden in masses of foliage. Across the garden they could hear the gilded door splintering under the onslaught of the desert men, and Azizun started convulsively at each blow as if it had impacted on her tender flesh. Panting with fright and excitement she tore at the fronds, pulling and pushing them aside until she disclosed a cunningly masked door set in the wall. Gordon had two cartridges left in the big pistol. He used one in blowing the antique lock apart. They burst through into another, smaller garden, lit with hanging lanterns, just as the gilded door gave way and a stream of wild figures with waving blades flooded into the Garden of the *Houris*.

In the midst of the garden into which the fugitives had come stood the slim minaret-like tower Gordon had noticed when he first entered the palace.

“That tower!” he snapped, slamming the door behind them and wedging it with a dagger — that might hold it for a few seconds at

least. “If we can get in there —”

“The Shaykh often sat in the upper chamber, watching the mountains with a telescope,” panted a Kurd. “He allowed none other but Bagheela in that upper chamber, but men say rifles are stored there. Arab guards sleep in the lower chamber —”

But there was nothing else for it. The Arabs had almost reached the door behind them, and from the racket that was being kicked up in every other direction, it would only be a matter of minutes before men would be swarming into the Garden of the Tower from every gate that opened into it. Gordon led his men in a run straight toward the tower, the door of which opened as five bewildered guards came out seeking the cause for the unwonted disturbance. They yelped in astonishment as they saw a knot of men racing toward them, teeth bared, eyes blazing in the light of the hanging lanterns, blades flashing. The guards, shaking the cobwebs of sleep from their brains, went into action just a second too late.

Gordon shot one and brained another with his gun butt an instant after the Arab had drilled one of the Kurds through the heart. The other Kurds swarmed over the three remaining Arabs, glutting ancient tribal hates in a wild burst of blood-letting, slashing and hacking and stabbing until the gay-clad figures lay still in a puddle of crimson.

Vengeful yells reached a crescendo behind them and the dagger-wedged door splintered inward, and the aperture was crowded with wild faces and waving arms as Muhammad’s men jammed there in their frantic eagerness to reach their prey. Gordon caught up a rifle an Arab had dropped and poured a stream of lead into that close-packed mass. At a hundred yards it was slaughter. One instant the gate was crowded with furious straining bodies, the next it was a shambles of gory, writhing, shrieking figures from which the living gave back aghast.

The Kurds howled deliriously and stormed into the tower — wheeled about to meet a charge of maddened Druses who had stolen unnoticed into the garden through another gate and rushed

into the doorway before the door could be closed. For a few seconds the open doorway was a hell of whickering steel and spurting blood, in which Gordon did his part with a rifle butt, and then the Druses staggered dazedly away, leaving three of their number lying in their blood before the door, while another hitched himself away on his elbow, blood spurting from severed arteries.

Gordon slammed the bronze door, and shot home a bolt that would have held against the charge of an elephant.

“Up the stairs! Quick! Get the guns!”

They rushed up, eyes and teeth gleaming, all but one who collapsed halfway up from loss of blood. Gordon half-dragged, half-carried him the rest of the way, laid him on the floor and ordered Azizun to bandage the ghastly gash made by a Druse saber, before he turned to take stock of their surroundings. They were in the upper chamber of the tower, which had no windows; but the walls were pierced with loop-holes of varying sizes and at every conceivable angle, some slanting downward, and all furnished with sliding iron covers. The Kurds chanted gleefully as they snatched the modern rifles which lined the walls in racks from which hung bandoliers of cartridges. Othman had prepared his aerie for defense as well as observation.

Every man was wounded more or less badly, but they all swarmed to the loop-holes and began firing gleefully down into the mob which surged about the door. These had come from every direction, while the besieged party was climbing the stair. Muhammad ibn Ahmed was not visible, but a hundred or so of his Arabs were, and a welter of men of a dozen other races. They swarmed the garden, yelling like fiends. The lanterns, swinging wildly under the impact of stumbling bodies against the slender trees, illuminated a mass of contorted faces, white eyeballs rolling madly upward. Blades flickered lightning-like all over the garden and rifles were discharged blindly. Bushes and shrubs were shredded underfoot as the mob milled and eddied. They had obtained a beam from somewhere and were using it as a ram against the door.

Gordon was surprized at the celerity with which he and his party had been pursued and trapped, until he heard Ivan Konaszevski's voice lifted like the slash of a saber above the clamor. The Cossack must have learned of Othman's death within a matter of minutes after it had occurred, and taken instant charge. His instant understanding of the situation, coupled with the chance that had caused Muhammad ibn Ahmed to block their escape, had undone the fugitives.

But if they were trapped they were not helpless. Yelping joyously the Kurds poured lead through the loop-holes. Even the sabered man, his bleeding stanched by a crude bandage, crawled to a loop-hole, propped himself on a divan and began firing wastefully down on his former associates. There was no missing at that range, and the leaden blasts tore lanes through the close-packed mob. Not even Ismailians could endure such slaughter. The throng broke in all directions, scattering for cover, and the Kurds whooped with frantic glee and dropped the fugitives as they ran.

In a few moments the garden was empty except for the dead and dying, and a storm of lead came whistling back from the walls and the windows of the palace which overlooked the Garden of the Tower, and from the roofs of houses that stood near the wall, outside in the square.

Lead flattened against the walls with a vicious spat! like a hornet smashing itself against a window in full flight. The tower was of stone, braced with bronze and iron. Bullets from outside seldom found an open loop-hole. Gordon did not believe it could be taken by storm, as long as their ammunition held out, and there were thousands of rounds in the upper chamber. But they had neither food nor water. The man who had been slashed with the saber was tortured by thirst, particularly, but, with the stoicism of his race, he made no complaint but lay silently chewing a bullet.

Gordon took stock of their position, looking through the loop-holes. The palace, as he knew, stood surrounded by gardens, except in the front where there was a wide courtyard. All was enclosed by an outer wall, and lower, inner walls separated the gardens,

somewhat like the spokes of a wheel, with the higher outer wall taking the place of the rim. The garden in which they were at bay lay on the north-west side of the palace, next to the courtyard, which was separated from it by a wall; another wall lay between it and the next garden to the west; both this garden and the Garden of the Tower lay outside the Garden of the *Houris*, which was half-enclosed by the walls of the palace itself. The courtyard wall connected with the wall of the Garden of the *Houris*, so that the Garden of the Tower was completely enclosed.

The north wall was the barrier which surrounded the whole of the palace grounds, and beyond it he looked down on the lighted roofs of the city. The nearest house was not over a hundred feet from the wall. Lights had been extinguished in it and in the other houses nearby, and men were crouching behind the parapets, sniping at the tower in the blind hope of hitting something besides stone. Lights blazed in all the palace windows, but the court and most of the adjoining gardens were dark.

Only in the besieged garden did the lighted lanterns still hang. It seemed strange and unreal, that lighted garden with the tower in the midst, deserted except for the sprawling bodies of the dead, while on all sides lurked unseen but vengeful multitudes.

The volleys ripping from all sides reflected a touch of panic, and the Kurds cursed venomously because they saw nothing to shoot back at. But suddenly there came a lull in the bombardment, and the men inside the tower likewise ceased firing, without orders. In the tense silence that followed Ivan Konaszevski's voice was raised from behind the courtyard wall.

"Are you ready to surrender, Gordon?"

Gordon laughed at him.

"Come and get us!"

"That's just what I intend to do — at dawn!" the Cossack assured him. "You are as good as a dead man now!"

"That's what you said when you left me in the ravine of the *djinn,"* Gordon retorted. "But I'm still alive — and the *djinn* is dead!"

He had spoken in Arabic, and a shout of anger and unbelief rose from all quarters. The Kurds, who had not asked Gordon a single question about his escape from the labyrinth of the ape, slapped their rifle stocks and nodded at each other as much as to say that slaying *djinni* was no more than was to be expected from El Borak.

"Do the Assassins know that the Shaykh is dead, Ivan?" called Gordon satirically.

"They know that Ivan Konaszevski is the real ruler of Shalizahr, as he has always been!" was the wrathful reply. "I don't know how you killed the ape, or how you got those Kurdish dogs out of their cell, but I do know that I'll have all your skins hanging on this wall before the sun is an hour high!"

"Kurdish dogs!" murmured the mountain warriors, caressing their rifles vengefully. "Ha! *Wallah!"*

But Gordon smiled, for he knew that if Yusuf ibn Suleiman had been captured, Ivan would have taunted them with the news. Gordon did not believe that any extended investigations of the dungeons had been, or would be made. All the attention of the Assassins was concentrated on the tower, and there was no point in their exploring the cells at the present. Gordon felt that he was justified in believing that Yusuf was still safe in the tunnel below the palace, waiting to let in Lal Singh and the Ghilzais.

Presently a banging and hammering sounded somewhere on the other side of the courtyard, which was not visible from the tower, and Konaszevski yelled vengefully: "Do you hear that, you American swine? Did you ever hear of a storming *belfroi*? Well, that's what my men are building — a mantlet on wheels that will stop bullets and protect fifty men behind it. As soon as it's daylight we're going to push it up to the tower and batter down the door. That will be your finish, you dog!"

"And yours," retorted Gordon. "You can't storm this tower without exposing yourself at least a little; and a little is all I'll need, you Russian wolfhound!"

The Cossack's answer was a shout of derisive laughter that was not convincing because it shook with fury, and thereafter there was no more parleying. Men still fired from the garden walls and the roofs outside, not hoping to hit anything, but evidently intending to discourage any attempt to escape from the tower. Gordon did consider such a break; they could shoot out the lanterns which lighted the garden and make the try in the darkness — but he abandoned the idea. Men clustered thickly behind every wall that hemmed the garden in. Such an attempt would be suicide. The fortress had become a prison.

Gordon frankly admitted to himself that this was one jamb out of which he could not get himself by his own efforts. If the Ghilzais did not show up on schedule, he and his party were finished; and it gave him a twinge to think of Yusuf ibn Suleiman waiting for days, perhaps, in the corridors under the palace, until hunger drove him into the hands of his enemies, or down the ravine to escape. Then Gordon remembered that he had not told the Kurd how to reach the exit at the other end of the labyrinth.

The hammering and pounding went on in the unseen section of the court. Even if the Ghilzais came at sunrise they might be too late. He reflected that the Ismailians would have to break down a long section of the wall to get such a machine as Ivan had described into the garden. But that would not take long.

The Kurds did not share their leader's apprehensions. They had already wrought a glorious slaughter; they had a strong position; a leader they already worshipped as men used to worship kings; good rifles and plenty of ammunition. What more could a mountain warrior desire? They hugged their rifles and boasted vain-gloriously to each other and fired at everything that moved, letting the future take care of itself. So through the long hours the strange fight went on, the cracking of the rifles punctuated by the din of the hammers in the torch-lit court.

The Kurd with the sword-cut died just as dawn was paling the lanterns in the garden below. Gordon covered the dead man with a rug and stared haggardly at his pitiful band. The three Kurds knelt

at the loop-holes, looking like blood-stained ghouls in the ghostly grey light. Azizun was sleeping in utter exhaustion on the floor, her cheek pillowed on a childishly soft round arm.

The hammering had ceased and in the stillness he heard a creaking of massive wheels. He knew that the juggernaut the Ismailians had built during the night was being rolled across the courtyard, but he could not yet see it. He could make out the black forms of men huddled on the roofs of the houses beyond the outer wall. He looked further, over the roofs and clustering trees, toward the northern edge of the plateau. He saw no sign of life, in the growing light, among the boulders that lined the rim of the cliffs. Evidently the guards, undeterred by the fate of Yusuf and the other original sentries, had deserted their post to join the fighting at the palace. No Oriental ruler was ever able to command absolute obedience from all his men. But as he watched Gordon saw a group of a dozen or so men trudging along the road that led to the Stair. Konaszevski would not long leave that point unguarded, and Gordon could guess what would be the fate of the men who had deserted it.

He turned back toward his three Kurds who were looking at him silently, bearded faces turned toward him. He looked like the wildest barbarian that ever trod a battlefield, naked to the waist, his boots and breeches smeared with blood, his bronzed breast and shoulders scratched, and stained with powder smoke.

“The Ghilzais have not come,” he said abruptly. “Presently Konaszevski will send his slayers against us under cover of a great shield built on wheels. They will break down the door with a ram. We will slay some of them as they come up the stair. Then we will die.”

“Allah il allah!” they answered by way of agreement and acceptance of their *Kismet*. “We shall slay many before we die!” And they grinned like hungry wolves in the dawn and thumbed the bolts of their rifles.

Outside, from every wall and window guns began to crack and bullets spattered thick about the loop-holes. The men in the tower

could see the storming-machine now, rumbling ponderously across the courtyard. It was a massive affair of beams and brass and iron, on ox-wagon wheels, with an iron-headed ram projecting from an aperture in the center. At least fifty men could huddle behind and beneath it, safe from rifle-fire.

It rolled toward the wall and came to a halt, and sledge hammers began to crash on the wall.

All the noise had awakened Azizun who sat up rubbing her eyes, stared bewilderedly about her, and then cried out and ran to Gordon to cling to him and be comforted. Little of comfort he could offer her from his great store of pity for her. There was nothing now he could do for her, except to interpose his body between her and their enemies in the last charge, and mercifully save his last bullet for her.

Sensing the desperation of their position she lay like a child in his arms, her face hidden against his broad breast, moaning faintly. Gordon sat quietly, waiting the last grapple with the patience of the wild in which he had spent so much of his life, and his expression was composed, almost tranquil, though his eyes blazed unquenchably.

“The wall crumbles,” muttered a lynx-eyed Kurd crouching over his rifle at a loop-hole. “Dust rises under the hammers. Soon we will be able to see the workmen who swing the sledges on the other side of that wall. Then —”

“Listen!”

All in the tower heard it, but it was Azizun who started up and cried out as a new sound cut the medley to which they had become accustomed. It was a burst of firing off toward the north, and at the sound every rifle in Shalizahr was still suddenly.

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IX
The Red Orchard

Gordon sprang to a loop-hole on the north side of the tower. He looked over the roofs of Shalizahr toward the road that stretched out in the still white dawn. Half a dozen men were running along that road, firing backward as they ran. Behind them other figures were swarming out of the rocks that clustered the rim of the plateau.

These figures, miniature in the distance but distinctly etched in the early light, levelled rifles. Shots cracked, a cloud of smoke puffed out, and the fleeing figures stumbled and fell sprawling. A fierce deep yelling came to the ears listening in the suddenly noiseless city.

"Baber Khan!" ejaculated Gordon. Again the negligence of the Stair guards had aided him. The Ghilzais had climbed the unguarded Stair in time to slaughter the sentries coming to mount guard there. But he was aghast at the numbers which were swarming up on the plateau. When the stream of men ceased there were at least three hundred warriors pouring up the road toward Shalizahr. There was but one explanation: Lal Singh had not met them with his plan of attack. Gordon could visualize the scene that must have taken place when they reached the appointed rendezvous and found El Borak not there — the berserk rage of Yar Ali Khan and the vengeful fury that would send the tribesmen recklessly up the Stair to make a direct onslaught on the city of which they knew nothing, save that it held enemies they thought had slain their friend. What had happened to Lal Singh he could not even guess.

In Shalizahr frozen amazement had given way to hasty action. Men were yelling on the roofs, running about in the street. From

house-top to house-top the news of the invasion sped like wind, and in a few minutes men were shouting it in the palace courtyard. Gordon knew that Ivan would mount to some vantage point in the dome and see for himself, and he was not surprized, a few moments later, to hear the Cossack's whip-lash voice shouting orders. The hammering on the wall ceased. Men scurried out from behind the moving shield.

A few moments later men were pouring into the square from the gardens and court, and from the houses that flanked the square. The Kurds in the tower fired valiantly at them and scored some hits, but these were ignored. Gordon watched for Ivan but knew the Cossack would leave the palace at some exit not exposed to the fire from the tower. Presently he glimpsed him far down the street, amidst a glittering company of corseleted Arabs, at the head of which gleamed the plumed helmet of Muhammad ibn Ahmed. After them thronged hundreds of Ismailian warriors, well-armed, and in good marching order, for tribesmen. Evidently Ivan had taught them at least the rudiments of civilized warfare.

They swung along as if they intended to march out onto the plain and meet the oncoming horde in open battle, but at the end of the street they scattered suddenly, taking cover in the gardens and the houses on each side of the street.

The Afghans were still too far away to be able to see what was going on in the city. By the time they had reached a point where they could look down the street it seemed empty and deserted. But Gordon, from his vantage point high above the houses, could see the gardens at the northern end of the town clustered with menacing figures, the roofs loaded with men whose rifles glinted in the morning light. The Afghans were marching into a trap, while he stood there helpless. Gordon felt as if he were strangling.

A Kurd came and stood beside Gordon, knotting a rude bandage about a wounded wrist. He spoke through his teeth, with which he was tugging at the rag.

“Are those your friends? They are fools. They run headlong into the fangs of death.”

“I know!” Gordon’s knuckles showed white on his clenched fists.

“I know exactly what will happen,” said the Kurd. “When I was a palace guardsman I have heard Bagheela tell his officers his plan of defense, in case an enemy ever attacked the city.

“Do you see that orchard at the end of the street, on the east side? Fifty men with rifles hide there. You can glimpse the gleam of their barrels among the peach blossoms. Across the road is a garden we call the Garden of the Egyptian. There too fifty riflemen lurk in ambush. The house next to it is full of warriors, and so are the first three houses on the other side of the street.”

“Why tell me this?” snapped Gordon, his temper frayed thin by anxiety. “Can I not see the dogs crouching behind the parapets of the roofs?”

“Aye! The men in the orchard and in the garden will not fire until the Afghans have passed beyond them and are between the houses further on. Then the riflemen on the roofs will fire into them from each side and the men in the orchard and in the garden will rake their rear flanks. Not a man will escape.”

“If I could only warn them!” muttered Gordon.

The Kurd waved his hand toward the palace, and the roof of the nearest house, from which even then rifles were cracking from time to time.

“Bagheela would not leave you unguarded. At least a score of men still watch the tower. You would be riddled before you could get halfway across the garden.”

“God! Must I stand here helpless and see my friends slaughtered?” The veins stood out on Gordon’s neck and his black eyes took on a red tinge. Then he crouched suddenly like a panther poised for a spring as firing burst out at the other end of the town. He shouted, a deep, fierce shout of exultation.

“Look! The Afghans are spreading out and taking cover! Baber Khan is a crafty old wolf. Yar Ali Khan might rush headlong into a city he knew nothing about — not Baber Khan!”

It was true. Baber Khan, suspicious as a gaunt old wolf, had mistrusted the appearance of that innocent-looking street. Perhaps his caution had been whetted by the lessening of the firing at the other end of the town, which he had heard as he mounted the Stair. Perhaps his flinty eyes had caught the glitter of the rising sun on rifle barrels on the roofs. At any rate his three hundred warriors spread out in a long skirmish line, firing from behind boulders and from the natural pockets that pitted the rocky plain.

A scattering fire was returned from the nearest house-tops, but no shot was fired from the garden or in the orchard, and the shooting from the roofs was weak and ineffective.

“Look!”

A band of men, a hundred or so in number, emerged into the street from among the houses. They moved in ragged order out along the road, firing as they went. Gordon cursed suddenly and passionately, for he foresaw the trick. The Kurds craning over his shoulders wagged their turbans in confirmation.

“They go to draw the Afghans into a charge. They will fall back in confusion presently. There was never an Afghan who could resist pursuing a fleeing enemy. The Ghilzais will run into the trap set for them, after all.”

The nearest point of the Afghan line was a few hundred yards beyond the orchard. The Ismailians had scarcely passed the orchard when they received a withering fire from the full length of the irregular line, and their uneven ranks wavered as a dozen men fell. They held long enough to fire a volley in return, and then began to fall back. The bodies that dotted the plain showed that the Ismailians were prepared to pay a fair price for their ultimate victory.

The wolf-like yelling of the Afghans came plainly to the group in the tower as the Assassins broke and fled toward the shelter of the

houses. Just as the Kurd had predicted and Gordon had feared, the Ghilzais leaped up and charged after them, firing as they ran and howling like blood-mad demons.

They converged from both sides into the road, and there, though Baber Khan was unable to check their headlong rush, he did at least manage to beat and curse them into a more compact body as they surged into the end of the street.

The fleetest of the tribesmen were not a hundred yards behind the last-most Ismailians when the latter dashed between the orchard and the garden and raced on up the street. Gordon clenched his hands until his nails bit blood from his palms. Now the foremost of the Afghans were passing the further end of the garden — a few moments more and they would be in the jaws of the trap.

But something went wrong. Later Gordon learned that it was a turbaned head poked incautiously up above the garden wall that spoiled Ivan's trap. Baber Khan, with eyes that missed nothing, spied that head, and the bullet he instantly smashed through it caused the owner to jerk the trigger of his cocked rifle even as he died. At the crack of his rifle his mates, keyed to almost unbearable tension, fired mechanically and practically involuntarily. And the men in the orchard across the way, reacting without stopping to think, poured a ragged volley into the onrushing horde. And of course, at that, the men on the roofs ahead began firing spontaneously and without orders. When a trap that is hinged with hair-trigger precision is sprung prematurely, the result is always demoralization and confusion.

A score of Afghans bit the dust at the first volley, but Baber Khan instantly realized the trap and saw and took the only way out. The unexpected fire was like a slap of cold water in the faces of his men, sobering them out of their blind blood-madness, and before that could turn to panic, Baber Khan commanded their staggering attention by a high-pitched furious yell, and wheeling, led them straight at the orchard wall. They were accustomed, since their cradles, blindly to follow where he led. They followed him now, with the bullets from all sides ripping through their ranks.

A volley that blazed along the wall full in their faces left a line of crumpled bodies in the road but did not stop the charge. They went over the orchard wall like a typhoon-driven wave in the teeth of raking lead and biting steel, swamped the fifty men crouching there with sheer numbers, shot, stabbed or knocked them in the head before they could even break away, and then, from behind the wall themselves opened a savage fire on the garden and the houses.

In an instant the whole complection of the fight had changed. The road was full of dead men, but, at a loss of some forty warriors, Baber Khan had slipped out of the trap before it could close.

The Ghilzais were well covered by the wall, and the trees which crowded the orchard. Lead rained into the orchard from the garden across the way, and from the roofs of the houses, but with little effect. There were fountains in the orchard for water, and fruit on some of the trees. Unless dislodged by a direct charge, they could hold their position for days.

On the other hand, they were themselves in a vise. They could not take the city by sniping from behind an orchard wall, and if they emerged from their cover, they would be exterminated. They could not charge the houses, and they could not fall back across the plain and descend the Stair without being followed and massacred as they retreated. Continual firing from the houses would gradually decrease their numbers, until a charge would sweep over the wall and crush them as they had crushed the fifty riflemen who had first held the orchard.

And in the meantime, Gordon reflected savagely, he was hemmed up there in that accursed tower, while the men who had come to rescue him fought for their lives against a crafty and merciless foe. Tigerishly he paced the floor, his eyes burning, his hands quivering with the desire to be gripping gun butt or sword hilt. Azizun knelt near the wall, watching him with wide eyes, and the Kurds were silent.

The spattering of bullets on the tower outside maddened him. They were not shooting at anything they could see; were simply

warning him to keep under cover; to remain hemmed in until Ivan Konaszevski could exterminate his friends and return to destroy him at his leisure. A red mist floated before Gordon's eyes, making everything seem to swim in a gulf of blood.

He scarcely knew it when one of the Kurds wandered down into the lower chamber; but he was aware of the man's return, for he came up the steps three at a time, his eyes blazing.

"Effendi! Come and look! I tore the carpet off the floor of that chamber down there looking for loot, which is often hidden beneath floors, and I found a brass ring set in a slot. When I pulled upon it a trap-door opened in the floor, and a flight of stone-steps leads down!"

Gordon came out of his maze of helpless rage like an awakening panther, and raced headlong down the stair after the warrior. An instant later he was crouching over the open trap, striking one of the matches he had found in the upper chamber. The steps led down a few feet into a narrow tunnel. Gordon knelt in meditation while the match flickered out.

"That tunnel leads towards the palace," he said presently. "If Ivan knew of this he'd have led his men through it to attack us. Othman must have used this way in passing secretly to and from the palace. He'd naturally have secrets he'd keep even from Ivan. It's probable that only he and his black slaves knew of this tunnel; which means that no living men except ourselves know of it."

"We do not know where it leads to in the palace," reminded the Kurd.

"No. But it's worth taking a chance. Get the others."

When the three Kurds came trooping down with the girl, hugging her make-shift silk garment about her, he said briefly: "I'm gambling that this will lead us into some part of the palace that isn't full of Assassins. There can't be many men in the palace, and they are in the front part of the building, judging from the sound of the firing. Anyway, it's better to take a chance than to wait here to be butchered.

“If we get into the palace alive, we’ll make for the tunnel where Yusuf ibn Suleiman is hiding. There’s no point in his waiting there now, but of course he probably doesn’t know that. If we get there I’m going to send you men and the girl out through the ravines.” And in a few words he told them how to reach the cave and the hole in the cliff.

“We do not wish to leave thee, *effendi!”* Weariness and wounds were telling on the Kurds at last; their bearded faces were drawn and haggard, but they spoke with sincerity.

“You’ll obey my orders, as you swore to do, and so will Azizun —” as the girl showed evidences of mutiny. “You know the way to Khor. Go there, and give the people the same pass-word I told to Yusuf. Don’t be afraid in going through the ravines. The *djinn* is dead — and it was never anything but an ape, anyway. If you reach Khor, get into communication with Azizun’s family in Delhi. They’ll pay you well for returning her.”

“The dogs pollute their Hindu money! Thy command is enough. But, *effendi*, what of thee?”

“After you’ve gotten safely into the ravines I’m going to slip out of the palace and try to reach the orchard where the Afghans are at bay. They came to save me. I can not desert them. It is a point of *izzat.”*

He used the Afghan term unconsciously, but the Kurds understood; they too had their code of honor.

“I tell you this now, so if I fall before we reach the tunnel where Yusuf is, the rest of you will know what to do. Make for Khor! And now let’s go!”

They entered the tunnel, lighting their way with improvised torches. It was ornate for such a passage, walled with friezed marble, arched and tiled. It ran straight for some distance, until Gordon knew they were well under the palace. He was wondering if it connected with the dungeons when they came to a narrow flight of steps leading up to a bronze door. Careful listening betrayed no sound beyond the door, and Gordon pushed it open cautiously, rifle

ready. They emerged into an empty chamber, of which the secret door formed a panel in the wall. When Gordon pushed it shut behind them a hidden spring clicked. Their escape was cut off in that direction.

They stole across the chamber and peered through the curtained door into the dim corridor beyond. No sound broke the silence of the palace except the dry cracking of rifles some distance away. It was the men in the front part of the building shooting at the tower. Gordon smiled thinly to think that while the riflemen were so engaged, the folk they thought safely trapped were invading the palace behind them.

"Do you know exactly where we are now, Azizun?"

"Yes, *sahib."*

"Then lead us to the room which opens on the secret stair. There's no use warning everyone to go quietly."

"I do not think we will be discovered. The male slaves will be at the other end of the town, watching the fighting. The women, slaves and *houris*, will be hiding in terror in the upper chambers — possibly locked in by their masters," replied Azizun, leading them swiftly along the winding corridor.

She was apparently correct in her surmise, for they reached the door of the chamber which Gordon had occupied the day before without seeing anyone. But even as Gordon reached for the door, their hearts jumped into their throats at the mutter of two low voices and the soft tread of many feet in the chamber. It was as unexpected as a shot from ambush. Before they could retreat the door was thrown open, and then Gordon's rifle muzzle jammed hard into the belly of the man who had opened it.

For an instant both men stood frozen.

"Sahib!"

"Lal Singh!"

The Kurds behind Gordon stared wildly as they saw the great bearded Sikh throw his arms about their *effendi* in an embrace of

glad relief. Behind Lal Singh Yusuf ibn Suleiman in his Arab finery grinned like a bearded mountain devil, and fifty wild figures with rifles and tulwars crowded the chamber.

"I feared you were dead," Gordon said a bit unsteadily.

"I deserve to be, because I failed in my mission," said the Sikh contritely. "I should have reached the Gorge of the Kings before the Ghilzais. *Sahib,* at the western foot of the crags which surround this plateau, I came upon an old road-bed — the old caravan road which once ran through this country from Persia to India. It turns northward along the foot of the crags and comes into the Gorge of the Kings a mile or so to the west of the cleft where you killed the Mongol.

"It was easy going after I struck the road — but as I climbed down toward it I slipped and fell and struck my head against a rock. I must have lain senseless for hours. When I came to myself and pressed on, and reached the Gorge of the Kings, it was already dawn, and the Ghilzais, who had almost killed their horses in an all-night ride, had already passed through the cleft. I came upon their horses which they had left in the gorge, with some boys to watch them. They told me that Yar Ali Khan had used your rope to get upon the ledge that hides the mouth of the cleft, and had gotten through the door and shot the man guarding the cleft before the fellow knew the Afridi was near him. The secrets of these Assassins have been safe for so long, the fools have grown careless. Not even your entry of the city put them on their guard. They never guessed that men would follow you.

"Well, even as I started to follow the Ghilzais through the cleft, I heard firing from a point I knew to be the summit of the cliffs. I knew they were already on the plateau, for the firing receded as I listened. While I hesitated, not knowing what to do, and cursing myself for my failure to reach them in time, these fifty men rode into the gorge, following the Ghilzais. They are Waziris whom Baber Khan allowed to establish their village a few miles from Khor; hearing the Ghilzais were at war, they followed to aid in the fighting — and the looting. Seeing no better course I brought them

with me, as you had planned for me to bring the main force of the Ghilzais. The horses were tired, but even so we made good time, for we followed the old road-bed to a point within half a mile from the hole where I crawled through the cliff. And now we await your orders!"

"Shabash!" exclaimed Gordon. "There is man's work for us all."

"What has occurred, *sahib?"* the Sikh asked eagerly, while the wild Waziris, who had followed him merely because they knew him to be El Borak's comrade, crowded close eagerly. "We heard firing all the way, but of course could see nothing. And this Kurd, who opened the door for us, knows no more than we."

"The Ghilzais hold the orchard at the other end of the town," Gordon answered. "Later I will tell you of the battle; now there is work to do in haste." Turning to the three Kurds, he said: "Do you three men do as I have instructed you. Lal Singh, tell them where you left the Waziri horses." This done, Gordon added: "Ride to Khor and wait for us. If the battle goes against us, I charge you to see that Azizun gets safely home."

They salaamed silently; the girl would have clung to him and wept, but there was no time, even for a woman's tears. At his word the Kurds picked her up bodily though with clumsy gentleness, and bore her weeping through the secret panel.

"And now out of this palace," said Gordon. "We're going to get in the fighting, but it will do Baber Khan no good for us to be hemmed up in that orchard with him. We're going to try to make that garden across the road from the orchard — you know the plan of the city, Lal Singh. From that point we can rake the houses on either side of the street, and be in position to flank any charge that tries to come down the street. Come on!"

Gordon set off along a corridor down which Musa had guided him the day before when he led him to be confronted by Ivan Konaszevski. The fifty tribesmen followed him, incongruous with their wild faces and ragged garments in that setting of rich tapestry and polished tile.

They peered about suspiciously at the sound of the rifles at the front of the palace, cracking away like an anti-climax. A few moments later Gordon led them into the hallway from which he had escaped the day before. The window still showed the bent, hacked bars, the balcony displayed the splintered lattice. He paused a moment on the balcony, pointing out his plan to Lal Singh and the crowding tribesmen who pricked their ears for every word uttered by El Borak, as jewels dropped by an almost mythical hero.

"You see how the gardens lie in a solid rank west of the houses, separated only by walls between? The trees grow thick. If we skirt those gardens, keeping close to the western walls, our chances of being seen by anyone in the houses will be slight. I believe we can come up behind the Garden of the Egyptian without being discovered; the Assassins will all be looking the other way. I don't know how many men are in the Garden of the Egyptian, but a surprize attack from the rear ought to clear it. Come on now — through this broken lattice and over that wall. Nobody's watching this side of the palace."

Man after man they dropped from the balcony, raced after him across the garden and slid over the wall from which he had tumbled into the ravine. They found themselves on the bare rocky plain which ran to the palace wall at that point; but a few moments later they had followed the wall around and darted across the space that separated it from the first of the city-gardens.

The steady firing at the other end of the street indicated that the fighting was raging fiercely. Hundreds of rifles barking together made a deafening racket and Gordon winced at the thought of the storm of lead that must be sweeping through the orchard. It would take bloody toll of the defenders, despite the Ghilzais' skill at taking advantage of every bit of cover. But at least the noise covered his advance. With all that racket going on at the north end of the town, nobody would be very likely to be watching in the other direction.

And such must have been the case, for no alarm was raised as the swift and furtive band glided along the western edge of the gardens, bending low to keep beneath the wall as much as possible.

As they approached the north end of the street possibilities for discovery increased, yet at the same time the attention of their enemies in that part of the town was fixed even more absolutely in the other direction. And though Gordon and his followers could not know it, events were shaping for a typhoonic climax.

X
The Bloody Angle

Ivan Konaszevski, who had been directing the battle from the roof of the third house on the east side of the street, had already realized that it would take a charge in force to regain the orchard. He was a prey to doubts and uncertainties. He feared that reinforcements were expected by the Afghans, to defend the Stair against which he would have to divide his forces. He was haunted by the fear that Gordon, though trapped in the tower, might find a way to outwit the men who had been stationed to keep him there. The Cossack did not fear Gordon personally, but he sweat profusely at the thought of depending on wits less keen than his own to keep the American out of the fight. He feared that if the fight dragged on until nightfall, the Afghans might make a sally under cover of darkness and get into the houses near-by, from which it would be all but impossible to dislodge them. He feared the demoralizing effect of a long drawn-out battle on his men, whom he was already feeding *hashish* and whiskey to fire their zeal.

So though he would rather have waited until the Afghan force had been decimated by hours of sniping by hidden marksmen, he decided to wind up the feud in a blaze of blood and glory. The taking of the orchard by the Ghilzais had shown that a small force could not hold the comparatively low wall against a determined charge of superior numbers.

Leaving a few score riflemen on the roofs to keep the men in the orchard busy, Konaszevski drew most of his men out of the houses, and gathered them, four hundred strong, in the space between the third and fourth houses on the east side of the street, out of sight of

the beleaguered Afghans. He detached a force of a hundred men to steal through the gardens that lay on the east side of the town and charge the orchard from the east at the auspicious moment, while he led three hundred hemp-maddened fanatics straight down the street, against the southwestern angle of the orchard-wall.

The Cossack knew they would be protected by the houses up to the last few hundred feet, where a bare space separated the last house on that side from the orchard. Ivan knew that many men would die in that open space, but he believed enough men would survive to sweep over the wall in spite of the defenders' fire. And dead warriors could always be replaced; human life was the cheapest commodity in the Hills. Ivan was ready to sacrifice three-fourths of his army if it took that to crush the invaders.

The charge was signalled by a deafening roar from a dozen long bronze trumpets in the hands of Ivan's Mongols. That maddening sound smote the ears of Gordon and his Waziris just as they slid, undetected, over the unguarded western wall of the Garden of the Egyptian. They were just raising their rifles to aim at the bare score of Assassins who crouched along the eastern wall, firing at the orchard across the way, and oblivious to anything behind them. That outrageous brazen clamor momentarily stunned and paralyzed them, and then a perfect hell-burst of yells followed the trumpets, and a mass of frenzied, weapon-brandishing humanity burst from between the houses across the way and swept up the street like a foaming torrent.

The men on the roofs and in the garden laid down a perfect barrage along the orchard wall, and all hell seemed bursting at once.

It was a moment where everything depended on a hair-trigger decision. And Gordon rose to the occasion, just as Baber Khan had risen earlier in the day. His eager but bewildered Waziris could not hear the order he shouted, but they understood him when he threw his rifle to his shoulder. In that raging hurricane of sound, the volley which cut down the twenty riflemen along the garden wall passed unnoticed. Those Assassins died looking the other way, without

knowing what hit them. A few seconds later their slayers were kneeling among their bodies, sighting over the wall in their place. The men still on the roofs, firing madly over the heads of their charging comrades, never knew what had taken place in the Garden of the Egyptian.

The Waziris had not yet reached the east wall when the frothing horde swept past the last house and lunged toward the orchard. A fearful volley met them; the wall was lined by jetting spurts of flame and smoke rolled up in a cloud. The whole first rank went down. In an instant the road was carpeted with dead men. Ivan had counted on the momentum of that headlong charge to carry it over the open space, but even his fanatics faltered in the tearing teeth of that blast. They reeled and wavered.

But at that moment the hundred Ismailians who had circled through the gardens reached the east wall of the orchard and found it unguarded, because the Ghilzais had been forced to concentrate their forces in the southwest angle to meet the charge. Ivan had counted on that, too; but he had overlooked the density of the trees through which the hundred warriors would have to fire. So their volley into the backs of the men along the southwest walls, while murderous, was not as devastating as he had hoped it would be.

Nevertheless it staggered the Ghilzais, and in that moment, as their fire wavered, the maddened Ismailians in the road sent up a roar that burst the very ear-drums of battle, and surged irresistibly on the barrier. It was at that instant that Gordon and his Waziris opened fire from behind them. A whole line of men dropped, shot in the back, but the rush was not checked in the slightest. Like a roaring wave the Assassins rolled against the wall and locked with the defenders. Rifles poked over the wall from either side were fired full into snarling faces. Tulwars lunged up or hacked down. Men were dragged from the wall into the road, men scrambling up on the wall from without tumbled or were knocked over into the orchard. The Ismailians, trampling their dead and dying underfoot, clustered in a straining, heaving mass against the wall, those in front crushed upon it by the pressure of those behind. They swarmed upon the barrier fighting like furies, and as fast as they fell others took their place from the shrieking horde.

The Waziris in the garden fired again and again, and their slugs ripped into the rear flank of the mob, reaping a grisly harvest. But the frenzied horde was like a man who is so blood-madly intent on killing the foe before him that he is not aware that a knife is being plunged again and again into his back.

The hundred Ismailians in the orchard came tearing through the trees to fall on the rear of the Ghilzais with knife and rifle-butt. Gordon's Waziris, carried beyond themselves, leaped the garden wall and hurled themselves at the backs of the horde before the orchard, clubbing and stabbing. And the riflemen on the roofs deserted their posts to rush into the road and add their fury to the general frenzy.

It was at this moment that the wall gave way under the impact of hurtling tons of straining human flesh, and the red tides which had been foaming against the barrier on each side flowed together and mingled in an awful welter.

After that there was no semblance of order or plan, no chance to obey commands and no time to give them. It was all blind, gasping, sweating butchery, hand-to-hand, blood splashing the blossoms and

straining feet stamping the grass to shreds. Mixed and mingled inextricably, the heaving mass of fighters surged and eddied all over the orchard and flooded the road. The firing ceased, gave way to the crunch of clubbed rifle butts and the rip of stabbing blades. There was not much difference in the numbers of the rival hordes now, for the losses of the *Batinis* had been appalling. The outcome hung in the balance and no man knew how the general battle was going. Each man was too busy with his own individual problem of keeping a whole skin and killing the man next to him to be able to see what was going on about him.

Even Gordon, whose brain generally functioned crystal-clear in the reddest rages of battle, could obtain no distinct conception of that fight — the most savage of all the myriad unrecorded and unnamed battles fought out in the mystery of the Hills to decide the fate of empires.

He did not waste his breath trying to command order out of chaos. Craft and strategy had gone by the board; the fight would be decided by sheer manpower and individual ferocity. Hemmed in by howling madmen, with no one to listen to orders if he gave them, and no breath to give them in any event, there was nothing to do but break as many heads as he could and let the gods of chance decide the general issue.

Gordon remembered firing his last shot point-blank into a wild face. Then he clubbed his rifle and smote and smote and smote until the world became strange and red and hazy and he almost lost even his individuality in the tumult about him.

He knew — without being conscious that he knew — that Lal Singh fought on one side of him and Yusuf bin Suleiman on the other; and behind them, all who were left of the Waziris hung doggedly at his heels, swinging dripping tulwars.

And then, suddenly, as a fog thins when the wind strikes it, the battle was beginning to thin out, knotted masses splitting and melting into groups and individuals. Gordon knew that one side or the other was giving way; men were turning their backs to the

slaughter. It was the *Batinis* who wavered, the madness inspired by the hemp they had eaten beginning to die out. Without the drug their fury was less absolute than the desperation of the Hillmen who knew they must conquer to survive. Besides, the Ismailians were a mongrel throng, lacking the racial unity of the Afghans.

But the break did not come all at once. The edges of the battle crumbled away, but in the midst of the orchard the stubbornest fight of the whole day swirled and eddied about a dense clump of trees where the fiercest fighters of Shalizahr made their stand with their backs to the trees.

Gordon led his men that way, hacking through the loose lines of individual combats. He saw a glitter of gilded corselets among a wave of sheepskin coats, and Yusuf ibn Suleiman croaked something, and sprang away from his side, toward a plumed helmet which waved above the turbans.

And then Gordon saw Ivan Konaszevski. The Cossack was stripped to the waist, his cord-like muscles quivering and knotting to the lightning play of the saber in his hand. His dark eyes blazed and his thin lips wore a reckless smile. Three dead Ghilzais lay at his feet and his saber kept half a dozen blades in play at once. Right and left of him corseleted Arabs and squat Mongols in lacquered leather smote and wrestled breast to breast with wild Ghilzai swordsmen. And into this carnage Gordon's Waziris hurled themselves howling like wolves.

Gordon saw Yar Ali Khan for the first time, looming above the mob as he glutted his berserk fury in stupendous blows. And he saw Baber Khan — reeling out of the melee, covered with blood. Gordon began beating his way through to Konaszevski.

Ivan laughed, with a wild gleam in his dark eyes, as he saw the American coming toward him. Blood streamed down Gordon's muscular breast, coursed in tiny rivulets down his corded brown arms. The butt of his clubbed rifle was clotted with blood and brains.

“Come and die, El Borak!” laughed Ivan, and Gordon crouched for a charge, swinging the rifle butt above his head.

“Nay, *sahib*, take this!” And Lal Singh thrust into his hand the hilt of his dripping saber. El Borak straightened, shook his head to clear it, and came in as a Cossack would come, in a blazing whirl of action. Ivan sprang to meet him, and they fought as Cossacks fight, both attacking simultaneously, stroke raining on stroke too swiftly for the eye to follow them. Time might have turned back three hundred years to a duel between Zaporoghian swordsmen on the shores of the Dneiper.

And in a circle about them the panting, blood-stained warriors ceased their own work of slaughter to stare at the sight of two Western warriors settling the destiny of the East between them!

“Aie!” It was a cry from a hundred throats as Gordon stumbled, lost contact with the Cossack blade.

Ivan cried out ringingly, whirled up his sword — and felt Gordon’s saber in his heart before he realized the American had tricked him. He fell heavily, wrenching the hilt from Gordon’s hand. He was dead before he struck the ground, his thin lips twisted in a smile of bitter self-mockery.

Gordon was stooping to regain his sword when a shot cracked back among the trees; he stooped even lower as if to kneel to the dead man — and pitched suddenly across the corpse, blood oozing from his head. He did not hear the maddened yell that rose up to the hot blue skies, nor see the headlong rush of the frothing Afghans as they stormed past him and hurled themselves at the throats of their enemies.

Gordon’s first sensation of returning consciousness was a lack of sensation — a numbness that held him helpless. He seemed to lie in soft darkness. Then he heard voices, mumbling and incoherent at first, growing more distinct as life grew stronger in him. He began to distinguish the voices, and to recognize them. One was Yar Ali Khan’s, and he was startled to realize that the giant was weeping — blubbering vociferously and without shame.

“Aie! Ahai! Ohee! He is dead! His brains are pouring out of that hole in his head! Oh, my brother! Oh, prince of slayers! Oh, king among men! Oh, El Borak! Dead, for a mob of ragged hill-bastards! He whose smallest finger nail was worth more than all the Ghilzai horse-thieves in the Himalayas!”

“He is not dead, Allah curse you! And how are the Ghilzais to blame? My warriors lie dead by scores!” That was Baber Khan.

“Ohai! Would they had all died, and thou with them, aye, and I too, if so El Borak could have been saved alive.”

“Oh, hush that ox-bellowing and hand me that bandage!” That was Lal Singh. “I tell you, his wound is not mortal. The bullet but grazed his skull, knocking him senseless, curse the cowardly *Batini* who fired it.”

“I split the dog’s skull,” blubbered Yar Ali Khan. “But that can not restore life to our *sahib*. Here is the bandage. Sikhs have no hearts. They are a breed without bowels of compassion. Your friend and brother lies there dying, and you shed no tear! Nay, you mock me for my woe! By Allah, were it not that grief unmans me, I’d give you something to weep about!”

Gordon’s awakening senses were then aware of a throbbing in his head, which was eased somewhat under the manipulation of strong, gentle, skillful fingers that applied something wet and cool. The darkness cleared from his brain and eyes, and he looked up into the anxious faces of his friends.

“Sahib!” cried Lal Singh joyously. “Look, Baber Khan, he opens his eyes! Ali, if you were not blinded by those idiotic tears, you would see that El Borak lives, and is conscious!”

“Sahib!” yelled the great hairy cutthroat, and forthwith fell to weeping for joy. Gordon lifted his bandaged head, and set his teeth as the movement started it to throbbing agonizingly again. He was lying in a corner of the orchard wall, and a peach tree bent its branches over him, green leaves against blue sky, and blossoms raining petals about him in a soft shower as the breeze blew. But the

air reeked of fresh-spilt blood; there was blood on the grass, and a dead man lying face down a few yards away.

The orchard was strangely quiet after the noise of battle, but he thought he heard men screaming somewhere in the distance. He could not be sure, for the roaring inside his head.

“What happened?” he mumbled. “Is Ivan dead?”

“Dead as man can be with a saber through his heart, *sahib,”* answered Lal Singh. “The devil himself would have bitten at the trick you played on the Cossack. My own heart was in my mouth when you seemed to stumble. A *Batini* skulking among the trees shot you an instant later. But the heart was gone out of the Assassins, and our Afghans went stark mad when they saw you fall. They fell on the Ismailians with a fury that could not be withstood, and those sons of dogs gave way and fled in every direction — those who lived to flee. Even now the Ghilzais harry them up and down the street. Hearken!”

Gordon stared at Baber Khan.

“I feared you were slain.”

The chief grinned wryly. His beard was clotted with blood from a cut on the neck, and his leg was stuck out stiffly before him as he sat leaning against the wall.

“A bullet in the thigh. It is nothing. We feared you were dead.”

“Ha!” Yar Ali Khan smoothed his beard and stared scornfully at his friends. “Old women! *Sahib*, you should have heard them bellowing over you! *Wallah!* Did I not bid you cease your unmanly weeping? Did I not tell you that El Borak’s head was too hard for a bullet to break? Where are your manners? The *sahib* perhaps has orders!”

Gordon struggled up to a sitting position and stared out over the orchard. What he saw there shook even his iron nerves. It was a garden of corpses. The dead lay like fallen leaves in wind-blown heaps and mounds and straggling lines. In the bloody angle and in

the road outside the bodies were piled three deep, among the ruins of the wall.

“God!” For a moment Gordon was speechless, his soul in revolt. “Baber Khan, send someone after your warriors. Ali will go. Tell them to stop the slaughter. Enough men have died. Tell them to spare all who will lay down their arms and surrender. And another thing — there are many captive women in Shalizahr who are not to be harmed. I intend to return them to their homes.”

Yar Ali Khan swaggered off importantly to carry the orders, just as another man approached. Yusuf ibn Suleiman came toward Gordon, holding a broken scimitar. He spoke with difficulty because he had been slashed across the mouth and the bubbling blood choked him.

“Effendi, my sword broke with the last stroke, but it was enough. Muhammad ibn Ahmed lies yonder among the corpses of his corseleted dogs. He will never insult a mountain-Kurd again. Have I not kept faith, El Borak?”

“You have kept faith. But why ask me that question? I never expected anything but that you would keep faith.”

Yusuf sighed deeply and seated himself cross-legged beneath the tree, the broken sword across his knees.

A low moaning began to make itself manifest over the orchard — the wounded crying for water. Gordon grasped Lal Singh’s shoulder and rose stiffly.

“Baber Khan, we’ve got to get the wounded into the houses and do what we can for them. The women can help. I can stand alone, Lal Singh, and in a few minutes I’ll be able to walk without help. You and Yusuf go to the nearest canal and bring water.”

As the men set out, Gordon supported himself by grasping a peach limb; he had not yet fully recovered from the paralyzing shock of that bullet-wound. His legs still felt numb.

“I have been thinking while sitting here holding a broken leg, El Borak,” said Baber Khan. “This city is easier to defend than Khor;

with Ghilzai warriors guarding the outer cleft and the Stair, not even the Amir's field-pieces could take Shalizahr. I will send for the women and children and we will hold this plateau. Stay with us, El Borak, and rule beside me! We will build a kingdom here!"

"Are you touched with the madness that has led to the slaughter of hundreds this day?" retorted Gordon. "You see to what doom a like ambition has led the rulers of Shalizahr. They too plotted a kingdom among these Hills."

"But the Amir has doomed me anyway!"

"You need not fear his displeasure now! Any man who has freed him of the fear of the Triple-Bladed Dagger is sure of the Amir's pardon, regardless of his past offenses. My head upon it! Why do you think I summoned you to help me take this city? Merely to aid my own interests? You know me better than that. I knew that if we stamped out this nest of cobras together, it would win you the Amir's pardon."

Baber Khan sighed gustily.

"The sword is lifted from my neck by your words, El Borak. I have had no love for the life of an outlaw, but I was caught in a web of lies."

"We have broken that web. But at a bitter price. I wish it could have been done at lesser cost of brave men."

"All would have died, and me with them, if the Amir had come against us, as he planned," grunted Baber Khan. "Those who died, died as a Ghilzai wishes to die. And there will be loot for the living, and the women of the dead."

"Let's don't be too hasty about plundering. We'll have to deliver the city to the officers of the Amir, but I think I can persuade him to make you governor of the city. With these Ismailite thieves replaced by decent citizens from other parts of the kingdom, this will make a city of which any king should be proud. The Amir will wish to reward me for my part in this affair. I will ask him to place you in charge of the city. Governor of Shalizahr — how does that sound, Baber Khan?"

“Your generosity shames me,” said the Afghan chief, tugging at his beard in his deep emotion. “But what will you do, El Borak? You have provided for everyone except yourself.”

“Well, just now I’m going to take water to those poor devils out there, and tie up their wounds the best I can. I see Lal Singh and Yusuf coming with water, and my legs are alive again.”

“My men are coming back into the orchard. Let them do it. You are weary and wounded; you have been fighting all day, and all last night!”

“I can help. I’m alright. A few hours sleep tonight will make a fresh man of me. Dawn must find me on my way.”

“Whither, in the name of Allah?” ejaculated Baber Khan.

“First to Khor, to pick up Azizun. Then to Kabul to tell the Amir what has occurred, and secure your pardon and appointment as Governor of Shalizahr.”

“You will return to Shalizahr with it?”

“I’ll send Lal Singh back with the Amir’s escort. I have business in India.”

“Allaho akbar! Is there no rest or quiet about you? You are like a hawk roaming ever before the wind. What will you do in India?”

“I’ve got to take Azizun to Delhi. And I have a score to settle in Peshawar with a fat swine named Ditta Ram. Three years ago he murdered a friend of mine. I never could prove it, and another friend, an English official, begged me for his sake not to take the law into my own hands. I’ve been waiting three years for the dog to make a slip, and now he’s made it, and I can prove he’s made it. He’s put himself outside the protection of the law, and I’m going to settle that old score.”

“Allah!” marvelled Baber Khan. “And they say we Afghans are a relentless breed!”

He was still shaking his head in wonder as Gordon limped away, a hand outstretched for the jugs of water Lal Singh and Yusuf ibn Suleiman were bringing across the orchard.

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Hawk of the Hills

I

To a man standing in the gorge below, the man clinging to the sloping cliff would have been invisible, hidden from sight by the jutting ledges that looked like irregular stone steps from a distance. From a distance, also, the rugged wall looked easy to climb; but there were heartbreaking spaces between those ledges — stretches of treacherous shale, and steep pitches where clawing fingers and groping toes scarcely found a grip.

One misstep, one handhold lost and the climber would have pitched backward in a headlong, rolling fall three hundred feet to the rocky canyon bed. But the man on the cliff was Francis Xavier Gordon, and it was not his destiny to dash out his brains on the floor of a Himalayan gorge.

He was reaching the end of his climb. The rim of the wall was only a few feet above him, but the intervening space was the most dangerous he had yet covered. He paused to shake the sweat from

his eyes, drew a deep breath through his nostrils, and once more matched eye and muscle against the brute treachery of the gigantic barrier. Faint yells welled up from below, vibrant with hate and edged with blood lust. He did not look down. His upper lip lifted in a silent snarl, as a panther might snarl at the sound of his hunters' voices. That was all.

His fingers clawed at the stone until blood oozed from under his broken nails. Rivulets of gravel started beneath his boots and streamed down the ledges. He was almost there — but under his toe a jutting stone began to give way. With an explosive expansion of energy that brought a tortured gasp from him, he lunged upward, just as his foothold tore from the soil that had held it. For one sickening instant he felt eternity yawn beneath him — then his upflung fingers hooked over the rim of the crest. For an instant he hung there, suspended, while pebbles and stones went rattling down the face of the cliff in a miniature avalanche. Then with a powerful knotting and contracting of iron biceps, he lifted his weight and an instant later climbed over the rim and stared down.

He could make out nothing in the gorge below, beyond the glimpse of a tangle of thickets. The jutting ledges obstructed the view from above as well as from below. But he knew his pursuers were ranging those thickets down there, the men whose knives were still reeking with the blood of his friends. He heard their voices, edged with the hysteria of murder, dwindling westward. They were following a blind lead and a false trail.

Gordon stood up on the rim of the gigantic wall, the one atom of visible life among monstrous pillars and abutments of stone; they rose on all sides, dwarfing him, brown insensible giants shouldering the sky. But Gordon gave no thought to the somber magnificence of his surroundings, or of his own comparative insignificance.

Scenery, however awesome, is but a background for the human drama in its varying phases. Gordon's soul was a maelstrom of wrath, and the distant, dwindling shouts below him drove crimson waves of murder surging through his brain. He drew from his boot the long knife he had placed there when he began his desperate

climb. Half-dried blood stained the sharp steel, and the sight of it gave him a fierce satisfaction. There were dead men back there in the valley into which the gorge ran, and not all of them were Gordon's Afridi friends. Some were Orakzai, the henchmen of the traitor Afdal Khan — the treacherous dogs who had sat down in seeming amity with Yusef Shah, the Afridi chief, his three headmen and his American ally, and who had turned the friendly conference suddenly into a holocaust of murder.

Gordon's shirt was in ribbons, revealing a shallow sword cut across the thick muscles of his breast, from which blood oozed slowly. His black hair was plastered with sweat, the scabbards at his hips empty. He might have been a statue on the cliffs, he stood so motionless, except for the steady rise and fall of his arching chest as he breathed deep through expanded nostrils. In his black eyes grew a flame like fire on deep black water. His body grew rigid; muscles swelled in knotted cords on his arms, and the veins of his temples stood out.

Treachery and murder! He was still bewildered, seeking a motive. His actions until this moment had been largely instinctive, reflexes responding to peril and the threat of destruction. The episode had been so unexpected — so totally lacking in apparent reason. One moment a hum of friendly conversation, men sitting cross-legged about a fire while tea boiled and meat roasted; the next instant knives sinking home, guns crashing, men falling in the smoke — Afridi men, his friends, struck down about him, with their rifles laid aside, their knives in their scabbards.

Only his steel-trap coordination had saved him — that instant, primitive reaction to danger that is not dependent upon reason or any logical thought process. Even before his conscious mind grasped what was happening, Gordon was on his feet with both guns blazing. And then there was no time for consecutive thinking, nothing but desperate hand-to-hand fighting, and flight on foot — a long run and a hard climb. But for the thicket-choked mouth of a narrow gorge they would have had him, in spite of everything.

Now, temporarily safe, he could pause and apply reasoning to the problem of why Afdal Khan, chief of the Khoruk Orakzai, plotted thus foully to slay the four chiefs of his neighbors, the Afridis of Kurram, and their *Feringhi* friend. But no motive presented itself. The massacre seemed utterly wanton and reasonless. At the moment Gordon did not greatly care. It was enough to know that his friends were dead, and to know who had killed them.

Another tier of rock rose some yards behind him, broken by a narrow, twisting cleft. Into this he moved. He did not expect to meet an enemy; they would all be down there in the gorge, beating up the thickets for him; but he carried the long knife in his hand, just in case.

It was purely an instinctive gesture, like the unsheathing of a panther's claws. His dark face was like iron; his black eyes burned redly; as he strode along the narrow defile he was more dangerous than any wounded panther. An urge painful in its intensity beat at his brain like a hammer that would not cease: revenge! revenge! revenge! All the depths of his being responded to the reverberation. The thin veneer of civilization had been swept away by a red tidal wave. Gordon had gone back a million years into the red dawn of man's beginning; he was as starkly primitive as the colossal stones that rose about him.

Ahead of him the defile twisted about a jutting shoulder to come, as he knew, out upon a winding mountain path. That path would lead him out of the country of his enemies, and he had no reason to expect to meet any of them upon it. So it was a shocking surprise to him when he rounded the granite shoulder and came face to face with a tall man who lolled against a rock, with a pistol in his hand.

That pistol was leveled at the American's breast. Gordon stood motionless, a dozen feet separating the two men. Beyond the tall man stood a finely caparisoned Kabuli stallion, tied to a tamarisk.

"Ali Bahadur!" muttered Gordon, the red flame in his black eyes.

"Aye!" Ali Bahadur was clad in Pathan elegance. His boots were stitched with gilt thread, his turban was of rose-colored silk, and his

girdled *khalat* was gaudily striped. He was a handsome man, with an aquiline face and dark, alert eyes, which just now were lighted with cruel triumph. He laughed mockingly.

"I was not mistaken, El Borak. When you fled into the thicket-choked mouth of the gorge, I did not follow you as the others did. They ran headlong into the copse, on foot, bawling like bulls. Not I. I did not think you would flee on down the gorge until my men cornered you. I believed that as soon as you got out of their sight you would climb the wall, though no man ever has climbed it before. I knew you would climb out on this side, for not even Shaitan the Damned could scale those sheer precipices on the other side of the gorge.

"So I galloped back up the valley to where, a mile north of the spot where we camped, another gorge opens and runs westward. This path leads up out of that gorge and crosses the ridge and here turns southwesterly — as I knew you knew. My steed is swift! I knew this point was the only one at which you could reach this trail, and when I arrived, there were no boot prints in the dust to tell me you had reached it and passed on ahead of me. Nay, hardly had I paused when I heard stones rattling down the cliff, so I dismounted and awaited your coming! For only through that cleft could you reach the path."

"You came alone," said Gordon, never taking his eyes from the Orakzai. "You have more guts than I thought."

"I knew you had no guns," answered Ali Bahadur. "I saw you empty them and throw them away and draw your knife as you fought your way through my warriors. Courage? Any fool can have courage. I have wits, which is better."

"You talk like a Persian," muttered Gordon. He was caught fairly, his scabbards empty, his knife arm hanging at his side. He knew Ali would shoot at the slightest motion.

"My brother Afdal Khan will praise me when I bring him your head!" taunted the Orakzai. His Oriental vanity could not resist making a grandiose gesture out of his triumph. Like many of his

race, swaggering dramatics were his weakness; if he had simply hidden behind a rock and shot Gordon when he first appeared, Ali Bahadur might be alive today.

“Why did Afdal Khan invite us to a feast and then murder my friends?” Gordon demanded. “There has been peace between the clans for years.”

“My brother has ambitions,” answered Ali Bahadur. “The Afridis stood in his way, though they knew it not. Why should my brother waste men in a long war to remove them? Only a fool gives warning before he strikes.”

“And only a dog turns traitor,” retorted Gordon.

“The salt had not been eaten,” reminded Ali. “The men of Kurram were fools, and thou with them!” He was enjoying his triumph to the utmost, prolonging the scene as greatly as he dared. He knew he should have shot already.

There was a tense readiness about Gordon’s posture that made his flesh crawl, and Gordon’s eyes were red flame when the sun struck them. But it glutted Ali’s vanity deliriously to know that El Borak, the grimmest fighter in all the North, was in his power — held at pistol muzzle, poised on the brink of Jehannum into which he would topple at the pressure of a finger on the trigger. Ali Bahadur knew Gordon’s deadly quickness, how he could spring and kill in the flicker of an eyelid. But no human thews could cross the intervening yards quicker than lead spitting from a pistol muzzle. And at the first hint of movement, Ali would bring the gratifying scene to a sudden close.

Gordon opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it. The suspicious Pathan was instantly tense. Gordon’s eyes flickered past him, then back instantly, and fixed on his face with an increased intensity. To all appearances Gordon had seen something behind Ali — something he did not wish Ali to see, and was doing all in his power to conceal the fact that he had seen something, to keep Ali from turning his head. And turn his head Ali did; he did it

involuntarily, in spite of himself. He had not completed the motion before he sensed the trick and jerked his head back, firing as he did so, even as he caught the blur that was the lightninglike motion of Gordon's right arm.

Motion and shot were practically simultaneous. Ali went to his knees as if struck by sudden paralysis, and flopped over on his side. Gurgling and choking he struggled to his elbows, eyes starting from his head, lips drawn back in a ghastly grin, his chin held up by the hilt of Gordon's knife that jutted from his throat. With a dying effort he lifted the pistol with both hands, trying to cock it with fumbling thumbs. Then blood gushed from his blue lips and the pistol slipped from his hands. His fingers clawed briefly at the earth, then spread and stiffened, and his head sank down on his extended arms.

Gordon had not moved from his tracks. Blood oozed slowly from a round blue hole in his left shoulder. He did not seem to be aware of the wound. Not until Ali Bahadur's brief, spasmodic twitchings had ceased did he move. He snarled, the thick, blood-glutted snarl of a jungle cat, and spat toward the prostrate Orakzai.

He made no move to recover the knife he had thrown with such deadly force and aim, nor did he pick up the smoking pistol. He strode to the stallion which snorted and trembled at the reek of spilt blood, untied him and swung into the gilt-stitched saddle.

As he reined away up the winding hill path he turned in the saddle and shook his fist in the direction of his enemies — a threat and a ferocious promise; the game had just begun; the first blood had been shed in a feud that was to litter the hills with charred villages and the bodies of dead men, and trouble the dreams of kings and viceroys.

II

Geoffrey Willoughby shifted himself in his saddle and glanced at the gaunt ridges and bare stone crags that rose about him, mentally

comparing the members of his escort with the features of the landscape.

Physical environment inescapably molded its inhabitants. With one exception his companions were as sullen, hard, barbarous and somber as the huge brown rocks that frowned about them. The one exception was Suleiman, a Punjabi Moslem, ostensibly his servant, actually a valuable member of the English secret service.

Willoughby himself was not a member of that service. His status was unique; he was one of those ubiquitous Englishmen who steadily build the empire, moving obscurely behind the scenes, and letting other men take the credit — men in bemedaled uniforms, or loud-voiced men with top hats and titles.

Few knew just what Willoughby's commission was, or what niche he filled in the official structure, but the epitome of the man and his career was once embodied in the request of a harried deputy commissioner: "Hell on the border; send Willoughby!" Because of his unadvertised activities, troops did not march and cannons did not boom on more occasions than the general public ever realized. So it was not really surprising — except to those die-hards who refuse to believe that maintaining peace on the Afghan Border is fundamentally different from keeping order in Trafalgar Square — that Willoughby should be riding forth in the company of hairy cutthroats to arbitrate a bloody hill feud at the request of an Oriental despot.

Willoughby was of medium height and stockily, almost chubbily, built, though there were unexpected muscles under his ruddy skin. His hair was taffy-colored, his eyes blue, wide and deceptively ingenuous. He wore civilian khakis and a huge sun helmet. If he was armed the fact was not apparent. His frank, faintly freckled face was not unpleasant, but it displayed little evidence of the razor-sharp brain that worked behind it.

He jogged along as placidly as if he were ambling down a lane in his native Suffolk, and he was more at ease than the ruffians who accompanied him — four wild-looking, ragged tribesmen under the

command of a patriarch whose stately carriage and gray-shot pointed beard did not conceal the innate savagery reflected in his truculent visage. Baber Ali, uncle of Afdal Khan, was old, but his back was straight as a trooper's, and his gaunt frame was wolfishly hard. He was his nephew's right-hand man, possessing all Afdal Khan's ferocity, but little of his subtlety and cunning.

They were following a trail that looped down a steep slope which fell away for a thousand feet into a labyrinth of gorges. In a valley a mile to the south, Willoughby sighted a huddle of charred and blackened ruins.

"A village, Baber?" he asked.

Baber snarled like an old wolf.

"Aye! That was Khuttak! El Borak and his devils burned it and slew every man able to bear arms."

Willoughby looked with new interest. It was such things as that he had come to stop, and it was El Borak he was now riding to see.

"El Borak is a son of Shaitan," growled old Baber. "Not a village of Afdal Khan's remains unburned save only Khoruk itself. And of the outlying towers, only my *sangar* remains, which lies between this spot and Khoruk. Now he has seized the cavern called Akbar's Castle, and that is in Orakzai territory. By Allah, for an hour we have been riding in country claimed by us Orakzai, but now it has become a no man's land, a border strewn with corpses and burned villages, where no man's life is safe. At any moment we may be fired upon."

"Gordon has given his word," reminded Willoughby.

"His word is not wind," admitted the old ruffian grudgingly.

They had dropped down from the heights and were traversing a narrow plateau that broke into a series of gorges at the other end. Willoughby thought of the letter in his pocket, which had come to him by devious ways. He had memorized it, recognizing its dramatic value as a historical document.

GEOFFREY WILLOUGHBY,

Ghazrael Fort:

If you want to parley, come to Shaitan's Minaret, alone. Let your escort stop outside the mouth of the gorge. They won't be molested, but if any Orakzai follows you into the gorge, he'll be shot.

FRANCIS X. GORDON.

Concise and to the point. Parley, eh? The man had assumed the role of a general carrying on a regular war, and left no doubt that he considered Willoughby, not a disinterested arbiter, but a diplomat working in the interests of the opposing side.

"We should be near the Gorge of the Minaret," said Willoughby.

Baber Ali pointed. "There is its mouth."

"Await me here."

Suleiman dismounted and eased his steed's girths. The Pathans climbed down uneasily, hugging their rifles and scanning the escarpments. Somewhere down that winding gorge Gordon was lurking with his vengeful warriors. The Orakzai were afraid. They were miles from Khoruk, in the midst of a region that had become a bloody debatable ground through slaughter on both sides. They instinctively looked toward the southwest where, miles away, lay the crag-built village of Kurram.

Baber twisted his beard and gnawed the corner of his lip. He seemed devoured by an inward fire of anger and suspicion which would not let him rest.

"You will go forward from this point alone, *sahib*?"

Willoughby nodded, gathering up his reins.

"He will kill you!"

"I think not."

Willoughby knew very well that Baber Ali would never have thus placed himself within Gordon's reach unless he placed full confidence in the American's promise of safety.

“Then make the dog agree to a truce!” snarled Baber, his savage arrogance submerging his grudging civility. “By Allah, this feud is a thorn in the side of Afdal Khan — and of me!”

“We’ll see.” Willoughby nudged his mount with his heels and jogged on down the gorge, not an impressive figure at all as he slumped carelessly in his saddle, his cork helmet bobbing with each step of the horse. Behind him the Pathans watched eagerly until he passed out of sight around a bend of the canyon.

Willoughby’s tranquility was partly, though not altogether, assumed. He was not afraid, nor was he excited. But he would have been more than human had not the anticipation of meeting El Borak stirred his imagination to a certain extent and roused speculations.

The name of El Borak was woven in the tales told in all the *caravanserais* and *bazaars* from Teheran to Bombay. For three years rumors had drifted down the Khyber of intrigues and grim battles fought among the lonely hills, where a hard-eyed white man was hewing out a place of power among the wild tribesmen.

The British had not cared to interfere until this latest stone cast by Gordon into the pool of Afghan politics threatened to spread ripples that might lap at the doors of foreign palaces. Hence Willoughby, jogging down the winding Gorge of the Minaret. Queer sort of renegade, Willoughby reflected. Most white men who went native were despised by the people among whom they cast their lot. But even Gordon’s enemies respected him, and it did not seem to be on account of his celebrated fighting ability alone. Gordon, Willoughby vaguely understood, had grown up on the southwestern frontier of the United States, and had a formidable reputation as a gun fanner before he ever drifted East.

Willoughby had covered a mile from the mouth of the gorge before he rounded a bend in the rocky wall and saw the Minaret looming up before him — a tall, tapering spirelike crag, detached, except at the base, from the canyon wall. No one was in sight. Willoughby tied his horse in the shade of the cliff and walked

toward the base of the Minaret where he halted and stood gently fanning himself with his helmet, and idly wondering how many rifles were aimed at him from vantage points invisible to himself. Abruptly Gordon was before him.

It was a startling experience, even to a man whose nerves were under as perfect control as Willoughby's. The Englishman indeed stopped fanning himself and stood motionless, holding the helmet tilted. There had been no sound, not even the crunch of rubble under a boot heel to warn him. One instant the space before him was empty, the next it was filled by a figure vibrant with dynamic life. Boulders strewn at the foot of the wall offered plenty of cover for a stealthy advance, but the miracle of that advance — to Willoughby, who had never fought Yaqui Indians in their own country — was the silence with which Gordon had accomplished it.

“You’re Willoughby, of course.” The Southern accent was faint, but unmistakable.

Willoughby nodded, absorbed in his scrutiny of the man before him. Gordon was not a large man, but he was remarkably compact, with a squareness of shoulders and a thickness of chest that reflected unusual strength and vitality. Willoughby noted the black butts of the heavy pistols jutting from his hips, the knife hilt projecting from his right boot. He sought the hard bronzed face in vain for marks of weakness or degeneracy. There was a gleam in the black eyes such as Willoughby had never before seen in any man of the so-called civilized races.

No this man was no degenerate; his plunging into native feuds and brawls indicated no retrogression. It was simply the response of a primitive nature seeking its most natural environment. Willoughby felt that the man before him must look exactly as an untamed, pre-civilization Anglo-Saxon must have looked some ten thousand years before.

“I’m Willoughby,” he said. “Glad you found it convenient to meet me. Shall we sit down in the shade?”

“No. There’s no need of taking up that much time. Word came to me that you were at Ghazrael, trying to get in touch with me. I sent you my answer by a Tajik trader. You got it, or you wouldn’t be here. All right; here I am. Tell me what you’ve got to say and I’ll answer you.”

Willoughby discarded the plan he had partly formulated. The sort of diplomacy he’d had in mind wouldn’t work here. This man was no dull bully, with a dominance acquired by brute strength alone, nor was he a self-seeking adventurer of the politician type, lying and bluffing his way through. He could not be bought off, nor frightened by a bluff. He was as real and vital and dangerous as a panther, though Willoughby felt no personal fear.

“All right, Gordon,” he answered candidly. “My say is soon said. I’m here at the request of the Amir, and the *Raj*. I came to Fort Ghazrael to try to get in touch with you, as you know. My

companion Suleiman helped. An escort of Orakzai met me at Ghazrael, to conduct me to Khoruk, but when I got your letter I saw no reason to go to Khoruk. They're waiting at the mouth of the gorge to conduct me back to Ghazrael when my job's done. I've talked with Afdal Khan only once, at Ghazrael. He's ready for peace. In fact it was at his request that the Amir sent me out here to try to settle this feud between you and him."

"It's none of the Amir's business," retorted Gordon. "Since when did he begin interfering with tribal feuds?"

"In this case one of the parties appealed to him," answered Willoughby. "Then the feud affects him personally. It's needless for me to remind you that one of the main caravan roads from Persia traverses this region, and since the feud began, the caravans avoid it and turn up into Turkestan. The trade that ordinarily passes through Kabul, by which the Amir acquires much rich revenue, is being deflected out of his territory."

"And he's dickering with the Russians to get it back." Gordon laughed mirthlessly. "He's tried to keep that secret, because English guns are all that keep him on his throne. But the Russians are offering him a lot of tempting bait, and he's playing with fire — and the British are afraid he'll scorch his fingers — and theirs!"

Willoughby blinked. Still, he might have known that Gordon would know the inside of Afghan politics at least as well as himself.

"But Afdal Khan has expressed himself, both to the Amir and to me, as desiring to end this feud," argued Willoughby. "He swears he's been acting on the defensive all along. If you don't agree to at least a truce, the Amir will take a hand himself. As soon as I return to Kabul and tell him you refuse to submit to arbitration, he'll declare you an outlaw, and every ruffian in the hills will be whetting his knife for your head. Be reasonable, man. Doubtless you feel you had provocation for your attacks on Afdal Khan. But you've done enough damage. Forget what's passed —"

"Forget!"

Willoughby involuntarily stepped back as the pupils of Gordon's eyes contracted like those of an angry leopard.

"Forget!" he repeated thickly. "You ask me to forget the blood of my friends! You've heard only one side of this thing. Not that I give a damn what you think, but you'll hear my side, for once. Afdal Khan has friends at court. I haven't. I don't want any."

So a wild Highland chief might have cast his defiance in the teeth of the king's emissary, thought Willoughby, fascinated by the play of passion in the dark face before him.

"Afdal Khan invited my friends to a feast and cut them down in cold blood — Yusef Shah, and his three chiefs — all sworn friends of mine, do you understand? And you ask me to forget them, as you might ask me to throw aside a worn-out scabbard! And why? So the Amir can grab his taxes off the fat Persian traders; so the Russians won't have a chance to inveigle him into some treaty the British wouldn't approve of; so the English can keep their claws sunk in on this side of the border, too!

"Well, here's my answer: You and the Amir and the *Raj* can all go to hell together. Go back to the Amir and tell him to put a price on my head. Let him send his Uzbek guards to help the Orakzai — and as many Russians and Britishers and whatever else he's able to get. This feud will end when I kill Afdal Khan. Not before."

"You're sacrificing the welfare of the many to avenge the blood of the few," protested Willoughby.

"Who says I am? Afdal Khan? He's the Amir's worst enemy, if the Amir only knew it, getting him embroiled in a war that's none of his business. In another month I'll have Afdal Khan's head, and the caravans will pass freely over this road again. If Afdal Khan should win — Why did this feud begin in the first place? I'll tell you! Afdal wants full control of the wells in this region, wells which command the caravan route, and which have been in the hands of the Afridis for centuries. Let him get possession of them and he'll fleece the merchants before they ever get to Kabul. Yes, and turn the trade permanently into Russian territory."

“He wouldn’t dare —”

“He dares anything. He’s got backing you don’t even guess. Ask him how it is that his men are all armed with Russian rifles! Hell! Afdal’s howling for help because I’ve taken Akbar’s Castle and he can’t dislodge me. He asked you to make me agree to give up the Castle, didn’t he? Yes, I thought so. And if I were fool enough to do it, he’d ambush me and my men as we marched back to Kurram. You’d hardly have time to get back to Kabul before a rider would be at your heels, to tell the Amir how I’d treacherously attacked Afdal Khan and been killed in self-defense, and how Afdal had been forced to attack and burn Kurram! He’s trying to gain by outside intervention what he’s lost in battle, and to catch me off my guard and murder me as he did Yusef Shah. He’s making monkeys out of the Amir and you. And you want me to let him make a monkey out of me — and a corpse too — just because a little dirty trade is being deflected from Kabul!”

“You needn’t feel so hostile to the British —” Willoughby began.

“I don’t; nor to the Persians, nor the Russians, either. I just want all hands to attend to their own business and leave mine alone.”

“But this blood-feud madness isn’t the proper thing for a white man,” pleaded Willoughby. “You’re not an Afghan. You’re an Englishman, by descent, at least —”

“I’m Highland Scotch and black Irish by descent,” grunted Gordon. “That’s got nothing to do with it. I’ve had my say. Go back and tell the Amir the feud will end — when I’ve killed Afdal Khan.”

And turning on his heel he vanished as noiselessly as he had appeared.

Willoughby started after him helplessly. Damn it all, he’d handled this matter like an amateur! Reviewing his arguments he felt like kicking himself; but any arguments seemed puerile against the primitive determination of El Borak. Debating with him was like arguing with a wind, or a flood, or a forest fire, or some other elemental fact. The man didn’t fit into any ordered classification; he

was as untamed as any barbarian who trod the Himalayas, yet there was nothing rudimentary or underdeveloped about his mentality.

Well, there was nothing to do at present but return to Fort Ghazrael and send a rider to Kabul, reporting failure. But the game was not played out. Willoughby's own stubborn determination was roused. The affair began to take on a personal aspect utterly lacking in most of his campaigns; he began to look upon it not only as a diplomatic problem, but also as a contest of wits between Gordon and himself. As he mounted his horse and headed back up the gorge, he swore he would terminate that feud, and that it would be terminated his way, and not Gordon's.

There was probably much truth in Gordon's assertions. Of course, he and the Amir had heard only Afdal Khan's side of the matter; and of course Afdal Khan was a rogue. But he could not believe that the chief's ambitions were as sweeping and sinister as Gordon maintained. He could not believe they embraced more than a seizing of local power in this isolated hill district. Petty exactions on the caravans, now levied by the Afridis; that was all.

Anyway, Gordon had no business allowing his private wishes to interfere with official aims, which, faulty as they might be, nevertheless had the welfare of the people in view. Willoughby would never have let his personal feelings stand in the way of policy, and he considered that to do so was reprehensible in others. It was Gordon's duty to forget the murder of his friends — again Willoughby experienced that sensation of helplessness. Gordon would never do that. To expect him to violate his instincts was as sensible as expecting a hungry wolf to turn away from raw meat.

Willoughby had returned up the gorge as leisurely as he had ridden down it. Now he emerged from the mouth and saw Suleiman and the Pathans standing in a tense group, staring eagerly at him. Baber Ali's eyes burned like a wolf's. Willoughby felt a slight shock of surprise as he met the fierce intensity in the old chief's eyes. Why should Baber so savagely desire the success of his emissary? The

Orakzai had been getting the worst of the war, but they were not whipped, by any means. Was there, after all, something behind the visible surface — some deep-laid obscure element or plot that involved Willoughby's mission? Was there truth in Gordon's accusations of foreign entanglements and veiled motives?

Baber took three steps forward, and his beard quivered with his eagerness.

"Well?" His voice was harsh as the rasp of a sword against its scabbard. "Will the dog make peace?"

Willoughby shook his head. "He swears the feud will end only when he has slain Afdal Khan."

"Thou hast failed!"

The passion in Baber's voice startled Willoughby. For an instant he thought the chief would draw his long knife and leap upon him. Then Baber Ali deliberately turned his back on the Englishman and strode to his horse. Freeing it with a savage jerk he swung into the saddle and galloped away without a backward glance. And he did not take the trail Willoughby must follow on his return to Fort Ghazrael; he rode north, in the direction of Khoruk. The implication was unmistakable; he was abandoning Willoughby to his own resources, repudiating all responsibility for him.

Suleiman bent his head as he fumbled at his mount's girths, to hide the tinge of gray that crept under his brown skin. Willoughby turned from staring after the departing chief, to see the eyes of the four tribesmen fixed un-winkingly upon him — hard, murky eyes from under shocks of tangled hair.

He felt a slight chill crawl down his spine. These men were savages, hardly above the mental level of wild beasts. They would act unthinkingly, blindly following the instincts implanted in them and their kind throughout long centuries of merciless Himalayan existence. Their instincts were to murder and plunder all men not of their own clan. He was an alien. The protection spread over him and his companion by their chief had been removed.

By turning his back and riding away as he had, Baber Ali had tacitly given permission for the *Feringhi* to be slain. Baber Ali was himself far more of a savage than was Afdal Khan; he was governed by his untamed emotions, and prone to do childish and horrible things in moments of passion. Infuriated by Willoughby's failure to bring about a truce, it was characteristic of him to vent his rage and disappointment on the Englishman.

Willoughby calmly reviewed the situation in the time he took to gather up his reins. He could never get back to Ghazrael without an escort. If he and Suleiman tried to ride away from these ruffians, they would undoubtedly be shot in the back. There was nothing else to do but try and bluff it out. They had been given their orders to escort him to the Gorge of the Minaret and back again to Fort Ghazrael. Those orders had not been revoked in actual words. The tribesmen might hesitate to act on their own initiative, without positive orders.

He glanced at the low-hanging sun, nudged his horse.

"Let's be on our way. We have far to ride."

He pushed straight at the cluster of men who divided sullenly to let him through. Suleiman followed him. Neither looked to right nor left, nor showed any sign that they expected the men to do other than follow them. Silently the Pathans swung upon their horses and trailed after them, rifle butts resting on thighs, muzzles pointing upward.

Willoughby slouched in his saddle, jogging easily along. He did not look back, but he felt four pair of beady eyes fixed on his broad back in sullen indecision. His matter-of-fact manner baffled them, exerted a certain dominance over their slow minds. But he knew that if either he or Suleiman showed the slightest sign of fear or doubt, they would be shot down instantly. He whistled tunelessly between his teeth, whimsically feeling as if he were riding along the edge of a volcano which might erupt at any instant.

They pushed eastward, following trails that wandered down into valleys and up over rugged slants. The sun dipped behind a thousand-foot ridge and the valleys were filled with purple shadows. They reached the spot where, as they passed it earlier in the day, Baber Ali had indicated that they would camp that night. There was a well there. The Pathans drew rein without orders from Willoughby. He would rather have pushed on, but to argue would have roused suspicions of fear on his part.

The well stood near a cliff, on a broad shelf flanked by steep slopes and ravine-cut walls. The horses were unsaddled, and Suleiman spread Willoughby's blanket rolls at the foot of the wall. The Pathans, stealthy and silent as wild things, began gathering dead tamarisk for a fire. Willoughby sat down on a rock near a cleft in the wall, and began tracing a likeness of Gordon in a small notebook, straining his eyes in the last of the twilight. He had a knack in that line, and the habit had proved valuable in the past, in the matter of uncovering disguises and identifying wanted men.

He believed that his calm acceptance of obedience as a matter of course had reduced the Pathans to a state of uncertainty, if not actual awe. As long as they were uncertain, they would not attack him.

The men moved about the small camp, performing various duties. Suleiman bent over the tiny fire, and on the other side of it a Pathan was unpacking a bundle of food. Another tribesman approached the fire from behind the Punjabi, bringing more wood.

Some instinct caused Willoughby to look up, just as the Pathan with the arm load of wood came up behind Suleiman. The Punjabi had not heard the man's approach; he did not look around. His first intimation that there was any one behind him was when the tribesman drew a knife and sank it between his shoulders.

It was done too quickly for Willoughby to shout a warning. He caught the glint of the firelight on the blade as it was driven into Suleiman's back. The Punjabi cried out and fell to his knees, and the man on the other side of the fire snatched a flint-lock pistol from

among his rags and shot him through the body. Suleiman drew his revolver and fired once, and the tribesman fell into the fire, shot through the head. Suleiman slipped down in a pool of his own blood, and lay still.

It all happened while Willoughby was springing to his feet. He was unarmed. He stood frozen for an instant, helpless. One of the men picked up a rifle and fired at him point-blank. He heard the bullet smash on a rock behind him. Stung out of his paralysis he turned and sprang into the cleft of the wall. An instant later he was running as fleetly down the narrow gap as his build would allow, his heels winged by the wild howls of triumph behind him.

Willoughby would have cursed himself as he ran, could he have spared the breath. The sudden attack had been brutish, blundering, without plan or premeditation. The tribesman had unexpectedly found himself behind Suleiman and had reacted to his natural instincts. Willoughby realized that if he had had a revolver he could probably have defeated the attack, at least upon his own life. He had never needed one before; had always believed diplomacy a better weapon than a firearm. But twice today diplomacy had failed miserably. All the faults and weaknesses of his system seemed to be coming to light at once. He had made a pretty hash of this business from the start.

But he had an idea that he would soon be beyond self-censure or official blame. Those bloodthirsty yells, drawing nearer behind him, assured him of that.

Suddenly Willoughby was afraid, horribly afraid. His tongue seemed frozen to his palate and a clammy sweat beaded his skin. He ran on down the dark defile like a man running in a nightmare, his ears straining for the expected sound of sandaled feet pattering behind him, the skin between his shoulders crawling in expectation of a plunging knife. It was dark. He caromed into boulders, tripped over loose stones, tearing the skin of his hands on the shale.

Abruptly he was out of the defile, and a knife-edge ridge loomed ahead of him like the steep roof of a house, black against the blue-

black star-dotted sky. He struggled up it, his breath coming in racking gasps. He knew they were close behind him, although he could see nothing in the dark.

But keen eyes saw the dim bulk of him outlined against the stars when he crawled over the crest. Tongues of red flame licked in the darkness below him; reports banged flatly against the rocky walls. Frantically he hauled himself over and rolled down the slope on the other side. But not all the way. Almost immediately he brought up against something hard yet yielding. Vaguely, half blind from sweat and exhaustion, he saw a figure looming over him, some object lifted in menace outlined against the stars. He threw up an arm but it did not check the swinging rifle stock. Fire burst in glittering sparks about him, and he did not hear the crackling of the rifles that ran along the crest of the ridge.

III

It was the smashing reverberation of gunfire, reechoing between narrow walls, which first impressed itself on Willoughby's sluggishly reviving consciousness. Then he was aware of his throbbing head. Lifting a hand to it, he discovered it had been efficiently bandaged. He was lying on what felt like a sheepskin coat, and he felt bare, cold rock under it. He struggled to his elbows and shook his head violently, setting his teeth against the shooting pain that resulted.

He lay in darkness, yet, some yards away, a white curtain shimmered dazzlingly before him. He swore and batted his eyes, and as his blurred sight cleared, things about him assumed their proper aspect. He was in a cave, and that white curtain was the mouth, with moonlight streaming across it. He started to rise and a rough hand grabbed him and jerked him down again, just as a rifle cracked somewhere outside and a bullet whined into the cave and smacked viciously on the stone wall.

"Keep down, *sahib!"* growled a voice in *Pashtu*. The Englishman was aware of men in the cave with him. Their eyes shone in the dark as they turned their heads toward him.

His groggy brain was functioning now, and he could understand what he saw. The cave was not a large one, and it opened upon a narrow plateau, bathed in vivid moonlight and flanked by rugged slopes. For about a hundred yards before the cave mouth the plain lay level and almost bare of rocks, but beyond that it was strewn with boulders and cut by gullies. And from those boulders and ravines white puffs bloomed from time to time, accompanied by sharp reports. Lead smacked and spattered about the entrance and whined venomously into the cavern. Somewhere a man was breathing in panting gasps that told Willoughby he was badly wounded. The moon hung at such an angle that it drove a white bar down the middle of the cave for some fifteen feet; and death lurked in that narrow strip, for the men in the cave.

They lay close to the walls on either side, hidden from the view of the besiegers and partially sheltered by broken rocks. They were not returning the fire. They lay still, hugging their rifles, the whites of their eyes gleaming in the darkness as they turned their heads from time to time.

Willoughby was about to speak, when on the plain outside a *kalpak* was poked cautiously around one end of a boulder. There was no response from the cave. The defenders knew that in all probability that sheepskin cap was stuck on a gun muzzle instead of a human head.

"Do you see the dog, *sahib?"* whispered a voice in the gloom, and Willoughby started as the answer came. For though it was framed in almost accentless *Pashtu,* it was the voice of a white man — the unmistakable voice of Francis Xavier Gordon.

"I see him. He's peeking around the other end of that boulder — trying to get a better shot at us, while his mate distracts our attention with that hat. See? Close to the ground, there — just about a hand's breadth of his head. Ready? All right — now!"

Six rifles cracked in a stuttering detonation, and instantly a white-clad figure rolled from behind the boulder, flopped convulsively and lay still, a sprawl of twisted limbs in the moonlight. That,

considered Willoughby, was damned good shooting, if no more than one of the six bullets hit the exposed head. The men in the cave had phosphorous rubbed on their sights, and they were not wasting ammunition.

The success of the fusillade was answered by a chorus of wrathful yells from outside, and a storm of lead burst against the cave. Plenty of it found its way inside, and hot metal splashing from a glancing slug stung Willoughby's arm through the sleeve. But the marksmen were aiming too high to do any damage, unwilling as they were to expose themselves to the fire from the cavern. Gordon's men were grimly silent; they neither wasted lead on unseen enemies, nor indulged in the jeers and taunts so dear to the Afghan fighting man.

When the storm subsided to a period of vengeful waiting, Willoughby called in a low voice: "Gordon! Oh, I say there, Gordon!"

An instant later a dim form crawled to his side.

"Coming to at last, Willoughby? Here, take a swig of this."

A whisky flask was pressed into the Englishman's hand.

"No thanks, old chap. I think you have a man who needs it worse than I." Even as he spoke he was aware that he no longer heard the stertorous breathing of the wounded man.

"That was Ahmed Khan," said Gordon. "He's gone; died while they were shooting in here a moment ago. Shot through the body as we were making for this cave."

"That's the Orakzai out there?" asked Willoughby.

"Who else?"

The throbbing in his head irritated the Englishman; his right forearm was painfully bruised, and he was thirsty.

"Let me get this straight, Gordon — am I a prisoner?"

"That depends on the way you look at it. Just now we're all hemmed up in this cave. Sorry about your broken head. But the

fellow who hit you didn't know but what you were an Orakzai. It was dark."

"What the devil happened, anyway?" demanded Willoughby. "I remember them killing Suleiman, and chasing me — then I got that clout on the head and went out. I must have been unconscious for hours."

"You were. Six of my men trailed you all the way from the mouth of the Gorge of the Minaret. I didn't trust Baber Ali, though it didn't occur to me that he'd try to kill you. I was well on my way back to Akbar's Castle when one of the men caught up with me and told me that Baber Ali had ridden off in the direction of his *sangar* and left you with his four tribesmen. I believed they intended murdering you on the road to Ghazrael, and laying it onto me. So I started after you myself.

"When you pitched camp by Jehungir's Well my men were watching from a distance, and I wasn't far away, riding hard to catch up with you before your escort killed you. Naturally I wasn't following the open trail you followed. I was coming up from the south. My men saw the Orakzai kill Suleiman, but they weren't close enough to do anything about it.

"When you ran into the defile with the Orakzai pelting after you, my men lost sight of you all in the darkness and were trying to locate you when you bumped into them. Khoda Khan knocked you stiff before he recognized you. They fired on the three men who were chasing you, and those fellows took to their heels. I heard the firing, and so did somebody else; we arrived on the scene just about the same time."

“Eh? What’s that? Who?”

“Your friend, Baber Ali, with thirty horsemen! We slung you on a horse, and it was a running fight until moonrise. We were trying to get back to Akbar’s Castle, but they had fresher horses and they ran us down. They got us hemmed out there on that plain and the only thing we could do was to duck in here and make our stand. So here we are, and out there he is, with thirty men — not including the three ruffians who killed your servant. He shot them in their tracks. I heard the shots and their death howls as we rode for the hills.”

“I guess the old villain repented of his temper,” said Willoughby. “What a cursed pity he didn’t arrive a few minutes earlier. It would have saved Suleiman, poor devil. Thanks for pulling me out of a nasty mess, old fellow. And now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be going.”

“Where?”

“Why, out there! To Ghazrael. First to Baber Ali, naturally. I’ve got a few things to tell that old devil.”

“Willoughby, are you a fool?” Gordon demanded harshly.

“To think you’d let me go? Well, perhaps I am. I’d forgotten that as soon as I return to Kabul, you’ll be declared an outlaw, won’t you? But you can’t keep me here forever, you know —”

“I don’t intend to try,” answered Gordon with a hint of anger. “If your skull wasn’t already cracked I’d feel inclined to bash your head for accusing me of imprisoning you. Shake the cobwebs out of your brain. If you’re an example of a British diplomat, Heaven help the empire!

“Don’t you know you’d instantly be filled with lead if you stepped out there? Don’t you know that Baber Ali wants your head right now more than he does mine?

“Why do you think he hasn’t sent a man riding a horse to death to tell Afdal Khan he’s got El Borak trapped in a cave miles from Akbar’s Castle? I’ll tell you: Baber Ali doesn’t want Afdal to know what a mess he’s made of things.

“It was characteristic of the old devil to ride off and leave you to be murdered by his ruffians; but when he cooled off a little, he realized that he’d be held responsible. He must have gotten clear to his *sangar* before he realized that. Then he took a band of horsemen and came pelting after you to save you, in the interest of his own skin, of course, but he got there too late — too late to keep them from killing Suleiman, and too late to kill you.”

“But what —”

“Look at it from his viewpoint, man! If he’d gotten there in time to keep any one from being killed, it would have been all right. But with Suleiman killed by his men, he dares not leave you alive. He knows the English will hold him responsible for Suleiman’s death, if they learn the true circumstances. And he knows what it means to murder a British subject — especially one as important in the secret service as I happen to know Suleiman was. But if he could put you out of the way, he could swear I killed you and Suleiman. Those

men out there are all Baber's personal following — hard-bitten old wolves who'll cut any throat and swear any lie he orders. If you go back to Kabul and tell your story, Baber will be in bad with the Amir, the British, and Afdal Khan. So he's determined to shut your mouth, for good and all."

Willoughby was silent for a moment; presently he said frankly: "Gordon, if I didn't have such a high respect for your wits, I'd believe you. It all sounds reasonable and logical. But damn it, man, I don't know whether I'm recognizing logic or simply being twisted up in a web of clever lies. You're too dangerously subtle, Gordon, for me to allow myself to believe anything you say, without proof."

"Proof?" retorted Gordon grimly. "Listen!"

Wriggling toward the cave mouth he took shelter behind a broken rock and shouted in *Pashtu:* "Ohai, Baber Ali!"

The scattered firing ceased instantly, and the moonlit night seemed to hold its breath. Baber Ali's voice came back, edged with suspicion.

"Speak, El Borak! I hearken."

"If I give you the Englishman will you let me and my men go in peace?" Gordon called.

"Aye, by the beard of Allah!" came the eager answer.

"But I fear he will return to Kabul and poison the Amir against me!"

"Then kill him and throw his head out," answered Baber Ali with an oath. "By Allah, it is no more than I will do for him, the prying dog!"

In the cave Willoughby murmured: "I apologize, Gordon!"

"Well?" The old Pathan was growing impatient. "Are you playing with me, El Borak? Give me the Englishman!"

"Nay, Baber Ali, I dare not trust your promise," replied Gordon.

A bloodthirsty yell and a burst of frenzied firing marked the conclusion of the brief parley, and Gordon hugged the shelter of the shattered boulders until the spasm subsided. Then he crawled back to Willoughby.

"You see?"

"I see! It looks like I'm in this thing to the hilt with you! But why Baber Ali should have been so enraged because I failed to arrange a truce —"

"He and Afdal intended taking advantage of any truce you arranged, to trap me, just as I warned you. They were using you as a cat's-paw. They know they're licked, unless they resort to something of the sort."

There followed a period of silence, in which Willoughby was moved to inquire: "What now? Are we to stay here until they starve us out? The moon will set before many hours. They'll rush us in the dark."

"I never walk into a trap I can't get out of," answered Gordon. "I'm just waiting for the moon to dip behind that crag and get its light out of the cave. There's an exit I don't believe the Orakzai know about. Just a narrow crack at the back of the cave. I enlarged it with a hunting knife and a rifle barrel before you recovered consciousness. It's big enough for a man to slip through now. It leads out onto a ledge fifty feet above a ravine. Some of the Orakzai may be down there watching the ledge, but I doubt it. From the plain out there it would be a long, hard climb around to the back of the mountain. We'll go down on a rope made of turbans and belts, and head for Akbar's Castle. We'll have to go on foot. It's only a few miles away, but the way we'll have to go is over the mountains, and a devil's own climb."

Slowly the moon moved behind the crag, and the silver sword no longer glimmered along the rocky floor. The men in the cavern could move about without being seen by the men outside, who waited the setting of the moon with the grim patience of gray wolves.

“All right, let’s go,” muttered Gordon. “Khoda Khan, lead the way. I’ll follow when you’re all through the cleft. If anything happens to me, take the *sahib* to Akbar’s Castle. Go over the ridges; there may be ambushes already planted in the valleys.”

“Give me a gun,” requested Willoughby. The rifle of the dead Ahmed Khan was pressed into his hand. He followed the shadowy, all-but-invisible file of Afridis as they glided into the deeper darkness in the recesses of the tunnellike cavern. Their sandals made no noise on the rocky floor, but the crunch of his boots seemed loud to the Englishman. Behind them Gordon lay near the entrance, and once he fired a shot at the boulders on the plain.

Within fifty feet the cavern floor began to narrow and pitch upward. Above them a star shone in utter blackness, marking the crevice in the rock. It seemed to Willoughby that they mounted the slanting incline for a long way; the firing outside sounded muffled, and the patch of moonlight that was the cave mouth looked small with distance. The pitch became steeper, mounting up until the taller of the Afridis bent their heads to avoid the rocky roof. An instant later they reached the wall that marked the end of the cavern and glimpsed the sky through the narrow slit.

One by one they squeezed through, Willoughby last. He came out on a ledge in the starlight that overhung a ravine which was a mass of black shadows. Above them the great black crags loomed, shutting off the moonlight; everything on that side of the mountain was in shadow.

His companions clustered at the rim of the shelf as they swiftly and deftly knotted together girdles and unwound turbans to make a rope. One end was tossed over the ledge and man after man went down swiftly and silently, vanishing into the black ravine below. Willoughby helped a stalwart tribesman called Muhammad hold the rope as Khoda Khan went down. Before he went, Khoda Khan thrust his head back through the cleft and whistled softly, a signal to carry only to El Borak’s alert ears.

Khoda Khan vanished into the darkness below, and Muhammad signified that he could hold the rope alone while Willoughby descended. Behind them an occasional muffled shot seemed to indicate that the Orakzai were yet unaware that their prey was escaping them.

Willoughby let himself over the ledge, hooked a leg about the rope and went down, considerably slower and more cautiously than the men who had preceded him. Above him the huge Afridi braced his legs and held the rope as firmly as though it were bound to a tree.

Willoughby was halfway down when he heard a murmur of voices on the ledge above which indicated that Gordon had come out of the cave and joined Muhammad. The Englishman looked down and made out the dim figures of the others standing below him on the ravine floor. His feet were a yard above the earth when a rifle cracked in the shadows and a red tongue of flame spat upward. An explosive grunt sounded above him and the rope went slack in his hands. He hit the ground, lost his footing and fell headlong, rolling aside as Muhammad came tumbling down. The giant struck the earth with a thud, wrapped about with the rope he had carried with him in his fall. He never moved after he landed.

Willoughby struggled up, breathless, as his companions charged past him. Knives were flickering in the shadows, dim figures reeling in locked combat. So the Orakzai had known of this possible exit! Men were fighting all around him. Gordon sprang to the rim of the ledge and fired downward without apparent aim, but a man grunted and fell, his rifle striking against Willoughby's boot. A dim, bearded face loomed out of the darkness, snarling like a ghoul. Willoughby caught a swinging tulwar on his rifle barrel, wincing at the jolt that ran through his fingers, and fired full into the bearded face.

"El Borak!" howled Khoda Khan, hacking and slashing at something that snarled and gasped like a wild beast.

"Take the *sahib* and go!" yelled Gordon.

Willoughby realized that the fall of Muhammad with the rope had trapped Gordon on the ledge fifty feet above them.

“Nay!” shrieked Khoda Khan. “We will cast the rope up to thee __”

“Go, blast you!” roared Gordon. “The whole horde will be on your necks any minute! Go!”

The next instant Willoughby was seized under each arm and hustled at a stumbling run down the dark gorge. Men panted on each side of him, and the dripping tulwars in their hands smeared his breeches. He had a vague glimpse of three figures sprawling at the foot of the cliff, one horribly mangled. No one barred their path as they fled; Gordon’s Afridis were obeying his command; but they had left their leader behind, and they sobbed curses through their teeth as they ran.

IV

Gordon wasted no time. He knew he could not escape from the ledge without a rope, by climbing either up or down, and he did not believe his enemies could reach the ledge from the ravine. He squirmed back through the cleft and ran down the slant of the cavern, expecting any instant to see his besiegers pouring into the moonlit mouth. But it stood empty, and the rifles outside kept up their irregular monotone. Obviously Baber Ali did not realize that his victims had attempted an escape by the rear. The muffled shots he must surely have heard had imparted no meaning to him, or perhaps he considered they but constituted some trickery of El Borak’s. Knowledge that an opponent is full of dangerous ruses is often a handicap, instilling an undue amount of caution.

Anyway, Baber Ali had neither rushed the cavern nor sent any appreciable number of men to reenforce the lurkers on the other side of the mountain, for the volume of his firing was undiminished. That meant he did not know of the presence of his men behind the cave. Gordon was inclined to believe that what he had taken for a

strategically placed force had been merely a few restless individuals skulking along the ravine, scouting on their own initiative. He had actually seen only three men, had merely assumed the presence of others. The attack, too, had been ill-timed and poorly executed. It had neither trapped them all on the ledge nor in the ravine. The shot that killed Muhammad had doubtless been aimed at himself.

Gordon admitted his mistake; confused in the darkness as to the true state of things, he had ordered instant flight when his companions might safely have lingered long enough to tie a stone to the end of the rope and cast it back up to him. He was neatly trapped and it was largely his own fault.

But he had one advantage: Baber did not know he was alone in the cavern. And there was every reason to believe that Willoughby would reach Akbar's Castle unpursued. He fired a shot into the plain and settled himself comfortably behind the rocks near the cave mouth, his rifle at his shoulder.

The moonlit plateau showed no evidence of the attackers beyond the puffs of grayish-white smoke that bloomed in woolly whorls from behind the boulders. But there was a tense expectancy in the very air. The moon was visible below the overhanging crag; it rested a red, bent horn on the solid black mass of a mountain wall. In a few moments the plain would be plunged in darkness and then it was inevitable that Baber would rush the cavern.

Yet Baber would know that in the darkness following the setting of the moon the captives might be expected to make a break for liberty. It was certain that he already had a wide cordon spread across the plain, and the line would converge quickly on the cave mouth. The longer Gordon waited after moonset, the harder it would be to slip through the closing semicircle.

He began wrenching bullets out of cartridges with his fingers and teeth and emptying the powder into his rifle barrel, even while he studied the terrain by the last light of the sinking moon. The plateau was roughly fan-shaped, widening rapidly from the cliff-flanked wall in which opened the cave mouth. Perhaps a quarter of a mile

across the plain showed the dark mouth of a gorge, in which he knew were tethered the horses of the Orakzai. Probably at least one man was guarding them.

The plain ran level and bare for nearly a hundred yards before the cavern mouth, but some fifty feet away, on the right, there was a deep narrow gully which began abruptly in the midst of the plain and meandered away toward the right-hand cliffs. No shot had been fired from this ravine. If an Orakzai was hidden there he had gone into it while Gordon and his men were at the back of the cavern. It had been too close to the cave for the besiegers to reach it under the guns of the defenders.

As soon as the moon set Gordon intended to emerge and try to work his way across the plain, avoiding the Orakzai as they rushed toward the cave. It would be touch and go, the success depending on accurate timing and a good bit of luck. But there was no other alternative. He would have a chance, once he got among the rocks and gullies. His biggest risk would be that of getting shot as he ran from the cavern, with thirty rifles trained upon the black mouth. And he was providing against that when he filled his rifle barrel to the muzzle with loose powder from the broken cartridges and plugged the muzzle solidly with a huge misshapen slug he found on the cave floor.

He knew as soon as the moon vanished they would come wriggling like snakes from every direction, to cover the last few yards in a desperate rush — they would not fire until they could empty their guns point-blank into the cavern and storm in after their volley with naked steel. But thirty pairs of keen eyes would be fixed on the entrance and a volley would meet any shadowy figure seen darting from it.

The moon sank, plunging the plateau into darkness, relieved but little by the dim light of the stars. Out on the plateau Gordon heard sounds that only razor-keen ears could have caught, much less

translated: the scruff of leather on stone, the faint clink of steel, the rattle of a pebble underfoot.

Rising in the black cave mouth he cocked his rifle, and poising himself for an instant, hurled it, butt first, as far to the left as he could throw it. The clash of the steel-shod butt on stone was drowned by a blinding flash of fire and a deafening detonation as the pent-up charge burst the heavy barrel asunder and in the intensified darkness that followed the flash Gordon was out of the cave and racing for the ravine on his right.

No bullet followed him, though rifles banged on the heels of that amazing report. As he had planned, the surprising explosion from an unexpected quarter had confused his enemies, wrenched their attention away from the cave mouth and the dim figure that flitted from it. Men howled with amazement and fired blindly and unreasoningly in the direction of the flash and roar. While they howled and fired, Gordon reached the gully and plunged into it almost without checking his stride — to collide with a shadowy figure which grunted and grappled with him.

In an instant Gordon's hands locked on a hairy throat, stifling the betraying yell. They went down together, and a rifle, useless in such desperate close quarters, fell from the Pathan's hand. Out on the plain pandemonium had burst, but Gordon was occupied with the blood-crazy savage beneath him.

The man was taller and heavier than himself and his sinews were like rawhide strands, but the advantage was with the tigerish white man. As they rolled on the gully floor the Pathan strove in vain with both hands to tear away the fingers that were crushing the life from his corded throat, then still clawing at Gordon's wrist with his left hand, began to grope in his girdle for a knife. Gordon released his throat with his left hand, and with it caught the other's right wrist just as the knife came clear.

The Pathan heaved and bucked like a wild man, straining his wolfish muscles to the utmost, but in vain. He could not free his knife wrist from Gordon's grasp nor tear from his throat the fingers

that were bending his neck back until his bearded chin jutted upward. Desperately he threw himself sidewise, trying to bring his knee up to the American's groin, but his shift in position gave Gordon the leverage he had been seeking.

Instantly El Borak twisted the Pathan's wrist with such savage strength that a bone cracked and the knife fell from the numb fingers. Gordon released the broken wrist, snatched a knife from his own boot and ripped upward — again, again, and yet again.

Not until the convulsive struggles ceased and the body went limp beneath him did Gordon release the hairy throat. He crouched above his victim, listening. The fight had been swift, fierce and silent, enduring only a matter of seconds.

The unexpected explosion had loosed hysteria in the attackers. The Orakzai were rushing the cave, not in stealth and silence, but yelling so loudly and shooting so wildly they did not seem to realize that no shots were answering them.

Nerves hung on hair triggers can be snapped by an untoward occurrence. The rush of the warriors across the plain sounded like the stampede of cattle. A man bounded up the ravine a few yards from where Gordon crouched, without seeing the American in the pitlike blackness. Howling, cursing, shooting blindly, the hillmen stormed to the cave mouth, too crazy with excitement and confused by the darkness to see the dim figure that glided out of the gully behind them and raced silently away toward the mouth of the distant gorge.

V

Willoughby always remembered that flight over the mountains as a sort of nightmare in which he was hustled along by ragged goblins through black defiles, up tendon-straining slopes and along knife-edge ridges which fell away on either hand into depths that turned him faint with nausea. Protests, exhortations and fervent profanity did not serve to ease the flying pace at which his escort was

trundling him, and presently he had no breath for protests. He did not even have time to be grateful that the expected pursuit did not seem to be materializing.

He gasped like a dying fish and tried not to look down. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the Afridis blamed him for Gordon's plight and would gladly have heaved him off a ridge but for their leader's parting command.

But Willoughby felt that he was just as effectually being killed by over-exertion. He had never realized that human beings could traverse such a path — or rather such a pathless track — as he was being dragged over. When the moon sank the going was even harder, but he was grateful, for the abysses they seemed to be continually skirting were but floating gulfs of blackness beneath them, which did not induce the sick giddiness resulting from yawning chasms disclosed by the merciless moonlight.

His respect for Gordon's physical abilities increased to a kind of frantic awe, for he knew the American was known to be superior in stamina and endurance even to these long-legged, barrel-chested, iron-muscled mountaineers who seemed built of some substance that was tireless. Willoughby wished they would tire. They hauled him along with a man at each arm, and one to pull, and another to push when necessary, but even so the exertion was killing him. Sweat bathed him, drenching his garments. His thighs trembled and the calves of his legs were tied into agonizing knots.

He reflected in dizzy fragments that Gordon deserved whatever domination he had achieved over these iron-jawed barbarians. But mostly he did not think at all. His faculties were all occupied in keeping his feet and gulping air. The veins in his temples were nearly bursting and things were swimming in a bloody haze about him when he realized his escort, or captors — or torturers — had slowed to a walk. He voiced an incoherent croak of gratitude and shaking the sweat out of his dilated eyes, he saw that they were treading a path that ran over a natural rock bridge which spanned a deep gorge. Ahead of him, looming above a cluster of broken peaks,

he saw a great black bulk heaving up against the stars like a misshapen castle.

The sharp challenge of a rifleman rang staccato from the other end of the span and was answered by Khoda Khan's bull-like bellow. The path led upon a jutting ledge and half a dozen ragged, bearded specters with rifles in their hands rose from behind a rampart of heaped-up boulders.

Willoughby was in a state of collapse, able only to realize that the killing grind was over. The Afridis half carried, half dragged him within the semicircular rampart and he saw a bronze door standing open and a doorway cut in solid rock that glowed luridly. It required an effort to realize that the glow came from a fire burning somewhere in the cavern into which the doorway led.

This, then, was Akbar's Castle. With each arm across a pair of brawny shoulders Willoughby tottered through the cleft and down a short narrow tunnel, to emerge into a broad natural chamber lighted by smoky torches and a small fire over which tea was brewing and meat cooking. Half a dozen men sat about the fire, and some forty more slept on the stone floor, wrapped in their sheepskin coats. Doorways opened from the huge main chamber, openings of other tunnels or cell-like niches, and at the other end there were stalls occupied by horses, a surprising number of them. Saddles, blanket rolls, bridles and other equipage, with stands of rifles and stacks of ammunition cases, littered the floor near the walls.

The men about the fire rose to their feet looking inquiringly at the Englishman and his escort, and the men on the floor awoke and sat up blinking like ghouls surprised by daylight. A tall broad-shouldered swashbuckler came striding out of the widest doorway opening into the cavern. He paused before the group, towering half a head taller than any other man there, hooked his thumbs in his girdle and glared balefully.

"Who is this *Feringhi*?" he snarled suspiciously. "Where is El Borak?"

Three of the escort backed away apprehensively, but Khoda Khan held his ground and answered: “This is the *sahib* Willoughby, whom El Borak met at the Minaret of Shaitan, Yar Ali Khan. We rescued him from Baber Ali, who would have slain him. We were at bay in the cave where Yar Muhammad shot the gray wolf three summers ago. We stole out by a cleft, but the rope fell and left El Borak on a ledge fifty feet above us, and —”

“Allah!” It was a blood-curdling yell from Yar Ali Khan who seemed transformed into a maniac. “Dogs! You left him to die! Accursed ones! Forgotten of God! I’ll —”

“He commanded us to bring this Englishman to Akbar’s Castle,” maintained Khoda Khan doggedly. “We tore our beards and wept, but we obeyed!”

“Allah!” Yar Ali Khan became a whirlwind of energy. He snatched up rifle, bandoleer and bridle. “Bring out the horses and saddle them!” he roared and a score of men scurried. “Hasten! Forty men with me to rescue El Borak! The rest hold the Castle. I leave Khoda Khan in command.”

“Leave the devil in command of hell,” quoth Khoda Khan profanely. “I ride with you to rescue El Borak — or I empty my rifle into your belly.”

His three comrades expressed similar intentions at the top of their voices — after fighting and running all night, they were wild as starving wolves to plunge back into hazard in behalf of their chief.

“Go or stay, I care not!” howled Yar Ali Khan, tearing out a fistful of his beard in his passion. “If El Borak is slain I will requite thee, by the prophet’s beard and my feet! Allah rot me if I ram not a rifle stock down thy accursed gullets — dogs, jackals, noseless abominations, hasten with the horses!”

“Yar Ali Khan!” It was a yell from beyond the arch whence the tall Afridi had first emerged. “One comes riding hard up the valley!”

Yar Ali Khan yelled bloodthirstily and rushed into the tunnel, brandishing his rifle, with everybody pelting after him except the men detailed to saddle the horses.

Willoughby had been forgotten by the Pathans in the madhouse brewed by Gordon's lieutenant. He limped after them, remembering tales told of this gaunt giant and his berserk rages. The tunnel down which the ragged horde was streaming ran for less than a hundred feet when it widened to a mouth through which the gray light of dawn was stealing. Through this the Afridis were pouring, and Willoughby, following them, came out upon a broad ledge a hundred feet wide and fifty deep, like a gallery before a house.

Around its semicircular rim ran a massive man-made wall, shoulder-high, pierced with loopholes slanting down. There was an arched opening in the wall, closed by a heavy bronze door, and from that door, which now stood open, a row of broad shallow steps niched in solid stone led down to a trail which in turn looped down a three-hundred-foot slope to the floor of a broad valley.

The cliffs in which the cave set closed the western end of the valley, which opened to the east. Mists hung in the valley and out of them a horseman came flying, growing ghostlike out of the dimness of the dawn — a man on a great white horse, riding like the wind.

Yar Ali Khan glared wildly for an instant, then started forward with a convulsive leap of his whole body, flinging his rifle high above his head.

"El Borak!" he roared.

Electrified by his yell, the men surged to the wall and those saddling the mounts inside abandoned their task and rushed out onto the ledge. In an instant the wall was lined with tense figures, gripping their rifles and glaring into the white mists rolling beyond the fleeing rider, from which they momentarily expected pursuers to appear.

Willoughby, standing to one side like a spectator of a drama, felt a tingle in his veins at the sight and sound of the wild rejoicing with which these wild men greeted the man who had won their allegiance. Gordon was no bluffing adventurer; he was a real chief of men; and that, Willoughby realized, was going to make his own job that much harder.

No pursuers materialized out of the thinning mists. Gordon urged his mount up the trail, up the broad steps, and as he rode through the gate, bending his head under the arch, the roar of acclaim that went up would have stirred the blood of a king. The Pathans swarmed around him, catching at his hands, his garments, shouting praise to Allah that he was alive and whole. He grinned down at them, swung off and threw his reins to the nearest man, from whom Yar Ali Khan instantly snatched them jealously, with a ferocious glare at the offending warrior.

Willoughby stepped forward. He knew he looked like a scarecrow in his stained and torn garments, but Gordon looked like a butcher, with blood dried on his shirt and smeared on his breeches where he had wiped his hands. But he did not seem to be wounded. He smiled at Willoughby for the first time.

"Tough trip, eh?"

"We've been here only a matter of minutes," Willoughby acknowledged.

"You took a short cut. I came the long way, but I made good time on Baber Ali's horse," said Gordon.

"You mentioned possible ambushes in the valleys —"

"Yes. But on horseback I could take that risk. I was shot at once, but they missed me. It's hard to aim straight in the early-morning mists."

"How did you get away?"

"Waited until the moon went down, then made a break for it. Had to kill a man in the gully before the cave. We were all twisted together when I let him have the knife and that's where this blood came from. I stole Baber's horse while the Orakzai were storming the empty cave. Stampeded the herd down a canyon. Had to shoot the fellow guarding it. Baber'll guess where I went, of course. He'll be after me as quickly as he and his men can catch their horses. I suspect they'll lay siege to the Castle, but they'll only waste their time."

Willoughby stared about him in the growing light of dawn, impressed by the strength of the stronghold. One rifleman could hold the entrance through which he had been brought. To try to advance along that narrow bridge that spanned the chasm behind the Castle would be suicide for an enemy. And no force on earth could march up the valley on this side and climb that stair in the teeth of Gordon's rifles. The mountain which contained the cave rose up like a huge stone citadel above the surrounding heights. The cliffs which flanked the valley were lower than the fortified ledge;

men crawling along them would be exposed to a raking fire from above. Attack could come from no other direction.

“This is really in Afdal Khan’s territory,” said Gordon. “It used to be a Mogul outpost, as the name implies. It was first fortified by Akbar himself. Afdal Khan held it before I took it. It’s my best safeguard for Kurram.

“After the outlying villages were burned on both sides, all my people took refuge in Kurram, just as Afdal’s did in Khoruk. To attack Kurram, Afdal would have to pass Akbar’s Castle and leave me in his rear. He doesn’t dare do that. That’s why he wanted a truce — to get me out of the Castle. With me ambushed and killed, or hemmed up in Kurram, he’d be free to strike at Kurram with all his force, without being afraid I’d burn Khoruk behind him or ambush him in my country.

“He’s too cautious of his own skin. I’ve repeatedly challenged him to fight me man to man, but he pays no attention. He hasn’t stirred out of Khoruk since the feud started, unless he had at least a hundred men with him — as many as I have in my entire force, counting these here and those guarding the women and children in Kurram.”

“You’ve done a terrible amount of damage with so small a band,” said Willoughby.

“Not difficult if you know the country, have men who trust you, and keep moving. Geronimo almost whipped an army with a handful of Apaches, and I was raised in his country. I’ve simply adopted his tactics. The possession of this Castle was all I needed to assure my ultimate victory. If Afdal had the guts to meet me, the feud would be over. He’s the chief; the others just follow him. As it is I may have to wipe out the entire Khoruk clan. But I’ll get him.”

The dark flame flickered in Gordon’s eyes as he spoke, and again Willoughby felt the impact of an inexorable determination, elemental in its foundations. And again he swore mentally that he would end the feud himself, in his own way, with Afdal Khan alive; though how, he had not the faintest idea at present.

Gordon glanced at him closely and advised: “Better get some sleep. If I know Baber Ali, he’ll come straight to the Castle after me. He knows he can’t take it, but he’ll try, anyway. He has at least a hundred men who follow him and take orders from nobody else — not even Afdal Khan. After the shooting starts there won’t be much chance for sleeping. You look a bit done up.”

Willoughby realized the truth of Gordon’s comment. Sight of the white streak of dawn stealing over the ash-hued peaks weighted his eyelids with an irresistible drowsiness. He was barely able to stumble into the cave, and the smell of frying mutton exercised no charm to keep him awake. Somebody steered him to a heap of blankets and he was asleep before he was actually stretched upon them.

Gordon stood looking down at the sleeping man enigmatically and Yar Ali Khan came up as noiselessly and calmly as a gaunt gray wolf; it would have been hard to believe he was the same hurricane of emotional upset which had stormed all over the cavern a short hour before.

“Is he a friend, *sahib?”*

“A better friend than he realizes,” was Gordon’s grim, cryptic reply. “I think Afdal Khan’s friends will come to curse the day Geoffrey Willoughby ever came into the hills.”

VI

Again it was the spiteful cracking of rifles which awakened Willoughby. He sat up, momentarily confused and unable to remember where he was or how he came there. Then he recalled the events of the night; he was in the stronghold of an outlaw chief, and those detonations must mean the siege Gordon had predicted. He was alone in the great cavern, except for the horses munching fodder beyond the bars at the other end. Among them he recognized the big white stallion that had belonged to Baber Ali.

The fire had died to a heap of coals and the daylight that stole through a couple of arches, which were the openings of tunnels connecting with the outer air, was augmented by half a dozen antique-looking bronze lamps.

A pot of mutton stew simmered over the coals and a dish full of *chupatties* stood near it. Willoughby was aware of a ravenous hunger and he set to without delay. Having eaten his fill and drunk deeply from a huge gourd which hung near by, full of sweet, cool water, he rose and started toward the tunnel through which he had first entered the Castle.

Near the mouth he almost stumbled over an incongruous object — a large telescope mounted on a tripod, and obviously modern and expensive. A glance out on the ledge showed him only half a dozen warriors sitting against the rampart, their rifles across their knees. He glanced at the ribbon of stone that spanned the deep gorge and shivered as he remembered how he had crossed it in the darkness. It looked scarcely a foot wide in places. He turned back, crossed the cavern and traversed the other tunnel.

He halted in the outer mouth. The wall that rimmed the ledge was lined with Afridis, kneeling or lying at the loopholes. They were not firing. Gordon leaned idly against the bronze door, his head in plain sight of any one who might be in the valley below. He nodded a greeting as Willoughby advanced and joined him at the door. Again the Englishman found himself a member of a besieged force, but this time the advantage was all with the defenders.

Down in the valley, out of effectual rifle range, a long skirmish line of men was advancing very slowly on foot, firing as they came, and taking advantage of every bit of cover. Farther back, small in the distance, a large herd of horses grazed, watched by men who sat cross-legged in the shade of the cliff. The position of the sun indicated that the day was well along toward the middle of the afternoon.

“I’ve slept longer than I thought,” Willoughby remarked. “How long has this firing been going on?”

“Ever since noon. They’re wasting Russian cartridges scandalously. But you slept like a dead man. Baber Ali didn’t get here as quickly as I thought he would. He evidently stopped to round up more men. There are at least a hundred down there.”

To Willoughby the attack seemed glaringly futile. The men on the ledge were too well protected to suffer from the long-range firing. And before the attackers could get near enough to pick out the loopholes, the bullets of the Afridis would be knocking them over like tenpins. He glimpsed men crawling among the boulders on the cliffs, but they were at the same disadvantage as the men in the valley below — Gordon’s riflemen had a vantage point above them.

“What can Baber Ali hope for?” he asked.

“He’s desperate. He knows you’re up here with me and he’s taking a thousand-to-one chance. But he’s wasting his time. I have enough ammunition and food to stand a six-month siege; there’s a spring in the cavern.”

“Why hasn’t Afdal Khan kept you hemmed up here with part of his men while he stormed Kurram with the rest of his force?”

“Because it would take his whole force to storm Kurram; its defenses are almost as strong as these. Then he has a dread of having me at his back. Too big a risk that his men couldn’t keep me cooped up. He’s got to reduce Akbar’s Castle before he can strike at Kurram.”

“The devil!” said Willoughby irritably, brought back to his own situation. “I came to arbitrate this feud and now I find myself a prisoner. I’ve got to get out of here — got to get back to Ghazrael.”

“I’m as anxious to get you out as you are to go,” answered Gordon. “If you’re killed I’m sure to be blamed for it. I don’t mind being outlawed for the things I have done, but I don’t care to shoulder something I didn’t do.”

“Couldn’t I slip out of here tonight? By way of the bridge —”

“There are men on the other side of the gorge, watching for just such a move. Baber Ali means to close your mouth if human means

can do it."

"If Afdal Khan knew what's going on he'd come and drag the old ruffian off my neck," growled Willoughby. "Afdal knows he can't afford to let his clan kill an Englishman. But Baber will take good care Afdal doesn't know, of course. If I could get a letter to him — but of course that's impossible."

"We can try it, though," returned Gordon. "You write the note. Afdal knows your handwriting, doesn't he? Good! Tonight I'll sneak out and take it to his nearest outpost. He keeps a line of patrols among the hills a few miles beyond Jehungir's Well."

"But if I can't slip out, how can you —"

"I can do it all right, alone. No offense, but you Englishmen sound like a herd of longhorn steers at your stealthiest. The Orakzai are among the crags on the other side of the Gorge of Mekram. I won't cross the bridge. My men will let me down on a rope ladder into the gorge tonight before moonrise. I'll slip up to the camp of the nearest outpost, wrap the note around a pebble and throw it among them. Being Afdal's men and not Baber's, they'll take it to him. I'll come back the way I went, after moonset. It'll be safe enough."

"But how safe will it be for Afdal Khan when he comes for me?"

"You can tell Afdal Khan he won't be harmed if he plays fair," Gordon answered. "But you'd better make some arrangements so you can see him and know he's there before you trust yourself outside this cave. And there's the pinch, because Afdal won't dare show himself for fear I'd shoot him. He's broken so many pacts himself he can't believe anybody would keep one. Not where his hide is concerned. He trusted me to keep my word in regard to Baber and your escort, but would he trust himself to my promise?"

Willoughby scowled, cramming the bowl of his pipe. "Wait!" he said suddenly. "I saw a big telescope in the cavern, mounted on a tripod — is it in working order?"

"I should say it is. I imported that from Germany by the way of Turkey and Persia. That's one reason Akbar's Castle has never been surprised. It carries for miles."

"Does Afdal Khan know of it?"

"I'm sure he does."

"Good!"

Seating himself on the ledge, Willoughby drew forth pencil and notebook, propped the latter against his knee, and wrote in his clear concise hand:

AFDAL KHAN: I am at Akbar's Castle, now being besieged by your uncle, Baber Ali. Baber was so unreasonably incensed at my failure to effect a truce that he allowed my servant Suleiman to be murdered, and now intends murdering me, to stop my mouth.

I don't have to remind you how fatal it would be to the interests of your party for this to occur. I want you to come to Akbar's Castle and get me out of this. Gordon assures me you will not be molested if you play fair, but here is a way by which you need not feel you are taking any chances: Gordon has a large telescope through which I can identify you while you are still out of rifle range. In the Gorge of Mekram, and southwest of the Castle, there is a mass of boulders split off from the right wall and well out of rifle range from the Castle. If you were to come and stand on those boulders, I could identify you easily.

Naturally, I will not leave the Castle until I know you are present to protect me from your uncle. As soon as I have identified you, I will come down the gorge alone. You can watch me all the way and assure yourself that no treachery is intended. No one but myself will leave the Castle. On your part I do not wish any of your men to advance beyond the boulders and I will not answer for their safety if they should, as I intend to safeguard Gordon in this matter as well as yourself.

GEOFFREY WILLOUGHBY.

He handed the letter over for Gordon to read.

The American nodded. "That may bring him. I don't know. He's kept out of my sight ever since the feud started."

Then ensued a period of waiting, in which the sun seemed sluggishly to crawl toward the western peaks. Down in the valley and on the cliffs the Orakzai kept up their fruitless firing with a persistency that convinced Willoughby of the truth of Gordon's

assertion that ammunition was being supplied them by some European power.

The Afridis were not perturbed. They lounged at ease by the wall, laughed, joked, chewed jerked mutton and fired through the slanting loopholes when the Orakzai crept too close. Three still white-clad forms in the valley and one on the cliffs testified to their accuracy. Willoughby realized that Gordon was right when he said the clan which held Akbar's Castle was certain to win the war eventually. Only a desperate old savage like Baber Ali would waste time and men trying to take it. Yet the Orakzai had originally held it. How Gordon had gained possession of it Willoughby could not imagine.

The sun dipped at last; the Himalayan twilight deepened into black-velvet, star-veined dusk. Gordon rose, a vague figure in the starlight.

"Time for me to be going."

He had laid aside his rifle and buckled a tulwar to his hip. Willoughby followed him into the great cavern, now dim and shadowy in the light of the bronze lamps, and through the narrow tunnel and the bronze door.

Yar Ali Khan, Khoda Khan, and half a dozen others followed them. The light from the cavern stole through the tunnel, vaguely etching the moving figures of the men. Then the bronze door was closed softly and Willoughby's companions were shapeless blurs in the thick soft darkness around him. The gorge below was a floating river of blackness. The bridge was a dark streak that ran into the unknown and vanished. Not even the keenest eyes of the hills, watching from beyond the gorge, could have even discerned the jut of the ledge under the black bulk of the Castle, much less the movements of the men upon it.

The voices of the men working at the rim of the ledge were low and murmurous as the whispering of the night breezes. Willoughby sensed rather than saw that they were lowering the rope ladder — a hundred and fifty feet of it — into the gorge. Gordon's face was a

light blur in the darkness. Willoughby groped for his hand and found him already swinging over the rampart onto the ladder, one end of which was made fast to a great iron ring set in the stone of the ledge.

"Gordon, I feel like a bounder, letting you take this risk for me. Suppose some of those devils are down there in the gorge?"

"Not much chance. They don't know we have this way of coming and going. If I can steal a horse, I'll be back in the Castle before dawn. If I can't, and have to make the whole trip there and back on foot, I may have to hide out in the hills tomorrow and get back into the Castle the next night. Don't worry about me. They'll never see me. Yar Ali Khan, watch for a rush before the moon rises."

"Aye, *sahib."* The bearded giant's undisturbed manner reassured Willoughby.

The next instant Gordon began to melt into the gloom below. Before he had climbed down five rungs the men crouching on the rampart could no longer see him. He made no sound in his descent. Khoda Khan knelt with a hand on the ropes, and as soon as he felt them go slack, he began to haul the ladder up. Willoughby leaned over the edge, straining his ears to catch some sound from below — scruff of leather, rattle of shale — he heard nothing.

Yar Ali Khan muttered, his beard brushing Willoughby's ear: "Nay, *sahib*, if such ears as yours could hear him, every Orakzai on this side of the mountain would know a man stole down the gorge! You will not hear him — nor will they. There are Lifters of the Khyber who can steal rifles out of the tents of the British soldiers, but they are blundering cattle compared to El Borak. Before dawn a wolf will howl in the gorge, and we will know El Borak has returned and will let down the ladder for him."

But like the others, the huge Afridi leaned over the rampart listening intently for some fifteen minutes after the ladder had been drawn up. Then with a gesture to the others he turned and opened the bronze door a crack. They stole through hurriedly. Somewhere in the blackness across the gorge a rifle cracked flatly and lead

spanged a foot or so above the lintel. In spite of the rampart some quick eye among the crags had caught the glow of the opened door. But it was blind shooting. The sentries left on the ledge did not reply.

Back on the ledge that overlooked the valley, Willoughby noted an air of expectancy among the warriors at the loopholes. They were momentarily expecting the attack of which Gordon had warned them.

"How did Gordon ever take Akbar's Castle?" Willoughby asked Khoda Khan, who seemed more ready to answer questions than any of the other taciturn warriors.

The Afridi squatted beside him near the open bronze gate, rifle in hand, the butt resting on the ledge. Over them was the blue-black bowl of the Himalayan night, flecked with clusters of frosty silver.

"He sent Yar Ali Khan with forty horsemen to make a feint at Baber Ali's *sangar,"* answered Khoda Khan promptly. "Thinking to trap us, Afdal drew all his men out of Akbar's Castle except three. Afdal believed three men could hold it against an army, and so they could — against an army. Not against El Borak. While Baber Ali and Afdal were striving to pin Yar Ali Khan and us forty riders between them, and we were leading the dogs a merry chase over the hills, El Borak rode alone down this valley. He came disguised as a Persian trader, with his turban awry and his rich garments dusty and rent. He fled down the valley shouting that thieves had looted his caravan and were pursuing him to take from him his purse of gold and his pouch of jewels.

"The accursed ones left to guard the Castle were greedy, and they saw only a rich and helpless merchant, to be looted. So they bade him take refuge in the cavern and opened the gate to him. He rode into Akbar's Castle crying praise to Allah — with empty hands, but a knife and pistols under his *khalat.* Then the accursed ones mocked him and set on him to strip him of his riches — by Allah they found they had caught a tiger in the guise of a lamb! One he slew with the

knife, the other two he shot. Alone he took the stronghold against which armies have thundered in vain! When we forty-one horsemen evaded the Orakzai and doubled back, as it had been planned, lo! the bronze gate was open to us and we were lords of Akbar's Castle! Ha! The forgotten of God charge the stair!"

From the shadows below there welled up the sudden, swift drum of hoofs and Willoughby glimpsed movement in the darkness of the valley. The blurred masses resolved themselves into dim figures racing up the looping trail. At the same time a rattle of rifle fire burst out behind the Castle, from beyond the Gorge of Mekram. The Afridis displayed no excitement. Khoda Khan did not even close the bronze gate. They held their fire until the hoofs of the foremost horses were ringing on the lower steps of the stair. Then a burst of flame crowned the wall, and in its flash Willoughby saw wild bearded faces, horses tossing heads and manes.

In the darkness following the volley there rose screams of agony from men and beasts, mingled with the thrashing and kicking of wounded horses and the grating of shod hoofs on stone as some of the beasts slid backward down the stair. Dead and dying piled in a heaving, agonized mass, and the stairs became a shambles as again and yet again the rippling volleys crashed.

Willoughby wiped a damp brow with a shaking hand, grateful that the hoofbeats were receding down the valley. The gasps and moans and cries which welled up from the ghastly heap at the foot of the stairs sickened him.

"They are fools," said Khoda Khan, levering fresh cartridges into his rifle. "Thrice in past attacks have they charged the stair by darkness, and thrice have we broken them. Baber Ali is a bull rushing blindly to his destruction."

Rifles began to flash and crack down in the valley as the baffled besiegers vented their wrath in blind discharges. Bullets smacked along the wall of the cliff, and Khoda Khan closed the bronze gate.

"Why don't they attack by way of the bridge?" Willoughby wondered.

“Doubtless they did. Did you not hear the shots? But the path is narrow and one man behind the rampart could keep it clear. And there are six men there, all skilled marksmen.”

Willoughby nodded, remembering the narrow ribbon of rock flanked on either hand by echoing depths.

“Look, *sahib*, the moon rises.”

Over the eastern peaks a glow began which grew to a soft golden fire against which the peaks stood blackly outlined. Then the moon rose, not the mellow gold globe promised by the forerunning luster, but a gaunt, red, savage moon, the moon of the high Himalayas.

Khoda Khan opened the bronze gate and peered down the stair, grunting softly in gratification. Willoughby, looking over his shoulder, shuddered. The heap at the foot of the stairs was no longer a merciful blur, for the moon outlined it in pitiless detail. Dead horses and dead men lay in a tangled gory mound with rifles and sword blades thrust out of the pile like weeds growing out of a scrap heap. There must have been at least a dozen horses, and almost as many men in that shambles.

“A shame to waste good horses thus,” muttered Khoda Khan. “Baber Ali is a fool.” He closed the gate.

Willoughby leaned back against the wall, drawing a heavy sheepskin coat about him. He felt sick and futile. The men down in the valley must feel the same way, for the firing was falling off, becoming spasmodic. Even Baber Ali must realize the futility of the siege by this time. Willoughby smiled bitterly to himself. He had come to arbitrate a hill feud — and down there men lay dead in heaps. But the game was not yet played out. The thought of Gordon stealing through those black mountains out there somewhere discouraged sleep. Yet he did slumber at last, despite himself.

It was Khoda Khan who shook him awake. Willoughby looked up blinking. Dawn was just whitening the peaks. Only a dozen men

squatted at the loopholes. From the cavern stole the reek of coffee and frying meat.

"Your letter has been safely delivered, *sahib.*"

"Eh? What's that? Gordon's returned?"

Willoughby rose stiffly, relieved that Gordon had not suffered on his account. He glanced over the wall. Down the valley the camp of the raiders was veiled by the morning mists, but several strands of smoke oozed toward the sky. He did not look down the stair; he did not wish to see the cold faces of the dead in the white dawn light.

He followed Khoda Khan into the great chamber where some of the warriors were sleeping and some preparing breakfast. The Afridi gestured toward a cell-like niche where a man lay. He had his back to the door, but the black, close-cropped hair and dusty khakis were unmistakable.

"He is weary," said Khoda Khan. "He sleeps."

Willoughby nodded. He had begun to wonder if Gordon ever found it necessary to rest and sleep like ordinary men.

"It were well to go upon the ledge and watch for Afdal Khan," said Khoda Khan. "We have mounted the telescope there, *sahib*. One shall bring your breakfast to you there. We have no way of knowing when Afdal will come."

Out on the ledge the telescope stood on its tripod, projecting like a cannon over the rampart. He trained it on the mass of boulders down the ravine. The Gorge of Mekram ran from the north to the southwest. The boulders, called the Rocks, were more than a mile to the southwest of the Castle. Just beyond them the gorge bent sharply. A man could reach the Rocks from the southwest without being spied from the Castle, but he could not approach beyond them without being seen. Nor could any one leave the Castle from that side and approach the Rocks without being seen by any one hiding there.

The Rocks were simply a litter of huge boulders which had broken off from the canyon wall. Just now, as Willoughby looked, the mist

floated about them, making them hazy and indistinct. Yet as he watched them they became more sharply outlined, growing out of the thinning mist. And on the tallest rock there stood a motionless figure. The telescope brought it out in vivid clarity. There was no mistaking that tall, powerful figure. It was Afdal Khan who stood there, watching the Castle with a pair of binoculars.

"He must have got the letter early in the night, or ridden hard to get here this early," muttered Willoughby. "Maybe he was at some spot nearer than Khoruk. Did Gordon say?"

"No, *sahib."*

"Well, no matter. We won't wake Gordon. No, I won't wait for breakfast. Tell El Borak that I'm grateful for all the trouble he's taken in my behalf and I'll do what I can for him when I get back to Ghazrael. But he'd better decide to let this thing be arbitrated. I'll see that Afdal doesn't try any treachery."

"Yes, *sahib."*

They tossed the rope ladder into the gorge and it unwound swiftly as it tumbled down and dangled within a foot of the canyon floor. The Afridis showed their heads above the ramparts without hesitation, but when Willoughby mounted the rampart and stood in plain sight, he felt a peculiar crawling between his shoulders.

But no rifle spoke from the crags beyond the gorge. Of course, the sight of Afdal Khan was sufficient guarantee of his safety. Willoughby set a foot in the ladder and went down, refusing to look below him. The ladder tended to swing and spin after he had progressed a few yards and from time to time he had to steady himself with a hand against the cliff wall. But altogether it was not so bad, and presently he heaved a sigh of relief as he felt the rocky floor under his feet. He waved his arms, but the rope was already being drawn up swiftly. He glanced about him. If any bodies had fallen from the bridge in the night battle, they had been removed. He turned and walked down the gorge, toward the appointed rendezvous.

Dawn grew about him, the white mists changing to rosy pink, and swiftly dissipating. He could make out the outlines of the Rocks plainly now, without artificial aid, but he no longer saw Afdal Khan. Doubtless the suspicious chief was watching his approach from some hiding place. He kept listening for distant shots that would indicate Baber Ali was renewing the siege, but he heard none. Doubtless Baber Ali had already received orders from Afdal Khan, and he visualized Afdal's amazement and rage when he learned of his uncle's indiscretions.

He reached the Rocks — a great heap of rugged, irregular stones and broken boulders, towering thirty feet in the air in places.

He halted and called: "Afdal Khan!"

"This way, *sahib,"* a voice answered. "Among the Rocks."

Willoughby advanced between a couple of jagged boulders and came into a sort of natural theater, made by the space inclosed between the overhanging cliff and the mass of detached rocks. Fifty men could have stood there without being crowded, but only one man was in sight — a tall, lusty man in early middle life, in turban and silken *khalat.* He stood with his head thrown back in unconscious arrogance, a broad tulwar in his hand.

The faint crawling between his shoulders that had accompanied Willoughby all the way down the gorge, in spite of himself, left him at the sight. When he spoke his voice was casual.

"I'm glad to see you, Afdal Khan."

"And I am glad to see you, *sahib*!*"* the Orakzai answered with a chill smile. He thumbed the razor-edge of his tulwar. "You have failed in the mission for which I brought you into these hills — but your death will serve me almost as well."

Had the Rocks burst into a roar about him the surprise would have been no more shocking. Willoughby literally staggered with the impact of the stunning revelation.

"What? My death? Afdal, are you mad?"

"What will the English do to Baber Ali?" demanded the chief.

“They’ll demand that he be tried for the murder of Suleiman,” answered Willoughby.

“And the Amir would hang him, to placate the British!” Afdal Khan laughed mirthlessly. “But if you were dead, none would ever know! Bah! Do you think I would let my uncle be hanged for slaying that Punjabi dog? Baber was a fool to let his men take the Indian’s life. I would have prevented it, had I known. But now it is done and I mean to protect him. El Borak is not so wise as I thought or he would have known that I would never let Baber be punished.”

“It means ruin for you if you murder me,” reminded Willoughby — through dry lips, for he read the murderous gleam in the Orakzai’s eyes.

“Where are the witnesses to accuse me? There is none this side of the Castle save you and I. I have removed my men from the crags near the bridge. I sent them all into the valley — partly because I feared lest one might fire a hasty shot and spoil my plan, partly because I do not trust my own men any farther than I have to. Sometimes a man can be bribed or persuaded to betray even his chief.

“Before dawn I sent men to comb the gorge and these Rocks, to make sure no trap had been set for me. Then I came here and sent them away and remained here alone. They do not know why I came. They shall never know. Tonight, when the moon rises, your head will be found in a sack at the foot of the stair that leads down from Akbar’s Castle and there will be a hundred men to swear it was thrown down by El Borak.

“And because they will believe it themselves, none can prove them liars. I want them to believe it themselves, because I know how shrewd you English are in discovering lies. I will send your head to Fort Ali Masjid, with fifty men to swear El Borak murdered you. The British will force the Amir to send an army up here, with field pieces, and shell El Borak out of my Castle. Who will believe him if he has the opportunity to say he did not slay you?”

“Gordon was right!” muttered Willoughby helplessly. “You are a treacherous dog. Would you mind telling me just why you forced this feud on him?”

“Not at all, since you will be dead in a few moments. I want control of the wells that dominate the caravan routes. The Russians will pay me a great deal of gold to help them smuggle rifles and ammunition down from Persia and Turkestan, into Afghanistan and Kashmir and India. I will help them, and they will help me. Some day they will make me Amir of Afghanistan.”

“Gordon was right,” was all Willoughby could say. “The man was right! And this truce you wanted — I suppose it was another trick?”

“Of course! I wanted to get El Borak out of my Castle.”

“What a fool I’ve been,” muttered Willoughby.

“Best make your peace with God than berate yourself, *sahib,”* said Afdal Khan, beginning to swing the heavy tulwar to and fro, turning the blade so that the edge gleamed in the early light. “There are only you and I and Allah to see — and Allah hates infidels! Steel is silent and sure — one stroke, swift and deadly, and your head will be mine to use as I wish —”

He advanced with the noiseless stride of the hillman. Willoughby set his teeth and clenched his hands until the nails bit into the palms. He knew it was useless to run; the Orakzai would overtake him within half a dozen strides. It was equally futile to leap and grapple with his bare hands, but it was all he could do; death would smite him in mid-leap and there would be a rush of darkness and an end of planning and working and all things hoped for —

“Wait a minute, Afdal Khan!”

The voice was moderately pitched, but if it had been a sudden scream the effect could have been no more startling. Afdal Khan started violently and whirled about. He froze in his tracks and the tulwar slipped from his fingers. His face went ashen and slowly, like an automaton, his hands rose above his shoulders.

Gordon stood in a cleft of the cleft, and a heavy pistol, held hip-high, menaced the chief's waistline. Gordon's expression was one of faint amusement, but a hot flame leaped and smoldered in his black eyes.

"El Borak!" stammered Afdal Khan dazedly. "El Borak!" Suddenly he cried out like a madman. "You are a ghost — a devil! The Rocks were empty — my men searched them —"

"I was hiding on a ledge on the cliff above their heads," Gordon answered. "I entered the Rocks after they left. Keep your hands away from your girdle, Afdal Khan. I could have shot you any time within the last hour, but I wanted Willoughby to know you for the rogue you are."

"But I saw you in the cave," gasped Willoughby, "asleep in the cave —"

"You saw an Afridi, Ali Shah, in some of my clothes, pretending to be sleeping," answered Gordon, never taking his eyes off Afdal Khan. "I was afraid if you knew I wasn't in the Castle, you'd refuse to meet Afdal, thinking I was up to something. So after I tossed your note into the Orakzai camp, I came back to the Castle while you were asleep, gave my men their orders and hid down the gorge.

"You see I knew Afdal wouldn't let Baber be punished for killing Suleiman. He couldn't if he wanted to. Baber has too many followers in the Khoruk clan. And the only way of keeping the Amir's favor without handing Baber over for trial, would be to shut your mouth. He could always lay it onto me, then. I knew that note would bring him to meet you — and I knew he'd come prepared to kill you."

"He might have killed me," muttered Willoughby.

"I've had a gun trained on him ever since you came within range. If he'd brought men with him, I'd have shot him before you left the Castle. When I saw he meant to wait here alone, I waited for you to find out for yourself what kind of a dog he is. You've been in no danger."

"I thought he arrived early, to have come from Khoruk."

“I knew he wasn’t at Khoruk when I left the Castle last night,” said Gordon. “I knew when Baber found us safe in the Castle he’d make a clean breast of everything to Afdal — and that Afdal would come to help him. Afdal was camped half a mile back in the hills — surrounded by a mob of fighting men, as usual, and under cover. If I could have got a shot at him then, I wouldn’t have bothered to deliver your note. But this is as good a time as any.”

Again the flames leaped up in the black eyes and sweat beaded Afdal Khan’s swarthy skin.

“You’re not going to kill him in cold blood?” Willoughby protested.

“No. I’ll give him a better chance than he gave Yusef Khan.”

Gordon stepped to the silent Pathan, pressed his muzzle against his ribs and drew a knife and revolver from Afdal Khan’s girdle. He tossed the weapons up among the rocks and sheathed his own pistol. Then he drew his tulwar with a soft rasp of steel against leather. When he spoke his voice was calm, but Willoughby saw the veins knot and swell on his temples.

“Pick up your blade, Afdal Khan. There is no one here save the Englishman, you, I and Allah — and Allah hates swine!”

Afdal Khan snarled like a trapped panther; he bent his knees, reaching one hand toward the weapon — he crouched there motionless for an instant eying Gordon with a wide, blank glare — then all in one motion he snatched up the tulwar and came like a Himalayan hill gust.

Willoughby caught his breath at the blinding ferocity of that onslaught. It seemed to him that Afdal’s hand hardly touched the hilt before he was hacking at Gordon’s head. But Gordon’s head was not there. And Willoughby, expecting to see the American overwhelmed in the storm of steel that played about him began to recall tales he had heard of El Borak’s prowess with the heavy, curved Himalayan blade.

Afdal Khan was taller and heavier than Gordon, and he was as quick as a famished wolf. He rained blow on blow with all the

strength of his corded arm, and so swiftly Willoughby could follow the strokes only by the incessant clangor of steel on steel. But that flashing tulwar did not connect; each murderous blow rang on Gordon's blade or swished past his head as he shifted. Not that the American fought a running fight. Afdal Khan moved about much more than did Gordon. The Orakzai swayed and bent his body agilely to right and left, leaped in and out, and circled his antagonist, smiting incessantly.

Gordon moved his head frequently to avoid blows, but he seldom shifted his feet except to keep his enemy always in front of him. His stance was as firm as that of a deep-rooted rock, and his blade was never beaten down. Beneath the heaviest blows the Pathan could deal it opposed an unyielding guard.

The man's wrist and forearm must be made of iron, thought Willoughby, staring in amazement. Afdal Khan beat on El Borak's tulwar like a smith on an anvil, striving to beat the American to his knee by the sheer weight of his attack; cords of muscle stood out on Gordon's wrist as he met the attack. He did not give back a foot. His guard never weakened.

Afdal Khan was panting and perspiration streamed down his dark face. His eyes held the glare of a wild beast. Gordon was not even breathing hard. He seemed utterly unaffected by the tempest beating upon him. And desperation flooded Afdal Khan's face, as he felt his own strength waning beneath his maddened efforts to beat down that iron guard.

"Dog!" he gasped, spat in Gordon's face and lunged in terrifically, staking all on one stroke, and throwing his sword arm far back before he swung his tulwar in an arc that might have felled an oak.

Then Gordon moved, and the speed of his shift would have shamed a wounded catamount. Willoughby could not follow his motion — he only saw that Afdal Khan's mighty swipe had cleft only empty air, and Gordon's blade was a blinding flicker in the rising sun. There was a sound as of a cleaver sundering a joint of beef and Afdal Khan staggered. Gordon stepped back with a low laugh, merciless as the ring of flint, and a thread of crimson wandered down the broad blade in his hand.

Afdal Khan's face was livid; he swayed drunkenly on his feet, his eyes dilated; his left hand was pressed to his side, and blood spouted between the fingers; his right arm fought to raise the tulwar that had become an imponderable weight.

"Allah!" he croaked. "Allah —" Suddenly his knees bent and he fell as a tree falls.

Willoughby bent over him in awe.

"Good heavens, he's shorn half asunder! How could a man live even those few seconds, with a wound like that?"

"Hillmen are hard to kill," Gordon answered, shaking the red drops from his blade. The crimson glare had gone out of his eyes;

the fire that had for so long burned consumingly in his soul had been quenched at last, though it had been quenched in blood.

“You can go back to Kabul and tell the Amir the feud’s over,” he said. “The caravans from Persia will soon be passing over the roads again.”

“What about Baber Ali?”

“He pulled out last night, after his attack on the Castle failed. I saw him riding out of the valley with most of his men. He was sick of the siege. Afdal’s men are still in the valley but they’ll leg it for Khoruk as soon as they hear what’s happened to Afdal. The Amir will make an outlaw out of Baber Ali as soon as you get back to Kabul. I’ve got no more to fear from the Khoruk clan; they’ll be glad to agree to peace.”

Willoughby glanced down at the dead man. The feud had ended as Gordon had sworn it would. Gordon had been in the right all along; but it was a new and not too pleasing experience to Willoughby to be used as a pawn in a game — as he himself had used so many men and women.

He laughed wryly. “Confound you, Gordon, you’ve bamboozled me all the way through! You let me believe that only Baber Ali was besieging us, and that Afdal Khan would protect me against his uncle! You set a trap to catch Afdal Khan, and you used me as bait! I’ve got an idea that if I hadn’t thought of that letter-and-telescope combination, you’d have suggested it yourself.”

“I’ll give you an escort to Ghazrael when the rest of the Orakzai clear out,” offered Gordon.

“Damn it, man, if you hadn’t saved my life so often in the past forty-eight hours, I’d be inclined to use bad language! But Afdal Khan was a rogue and deserved what he got. I can’t say that I relish your methods, but they’re effective! You ought to be in the secret service. A few years at this rate and you’ll be Amir of Afghanistan!”

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Blood of the Gods

I

It was the wolfish snarl on Hawkston's thin lips, the red glare in his eyes, which first roused terrified suspicion in the Arab's mind, there in the deserted hut on the outskirts of the little town of Azem. Suspicion became certainty as he stared at the three dark, lowering faces of the other white men, bent toward him, and all beastly with the same cruel greed that twisted their leader's features.

The brandy glass slipped from the Arab's hand and his swarthy skin went ashy.

"Lah!" he cried desperately. "No! You lied to me! You are not friends — you brought me here to murder me —"

He made a convulsive effort to rise, but Hawkston grasped the bosom of his *gumbaz* in an iron grip and forced him down into the camp chair again. The Arab cringed away from the dark, hawk-like visage bending close to his own.

“You won’t be hurt, Dirdar,” rasped the Englishman. “Not if you tell us what we want to know. You heard my question. Where is Al Wazir?”

The beady eyes of the Arab glared wildly up at his captor for an instant, then Dirdar moved with all the strength and speed of his wiry body. Bracing his feet against the floor, he heaved backward suddenly, toppling the chair over and throwing himself along with it. With a rending of worn cloth the bosom of the *gumbaz* came away in Hawkston’s hand, and Dirdar, regaining his feet like a bouncing rubber ball, dived straight at the only door, ducking beneath the pawing arm of the big Dutchman, Van Brock.

But he tripped over Ortelli’s extended leg and fell sprawling, rolling on his back to slash up at the Italian with the curved knife he had snatched from his girdle. Ortelli jumped back, yowling, blood spurting from his leg, but as Dirdar once more bounced to his feet, the Russian, Krakovitch, struck him heavily from behind with a pistol barrel.

As the Arab sagged to the floor, stunned, Hawkston kicked the knife out of his hand. The Englishman stooped, grabbed him by the collar of his *abba*, and grunted: “Help me lift him, Van Brock.”

The burly Dutchman complied, and the half-senseless Arab was slammed down in the chair from which he had just escaped. They did not tie him, but Krakovitch stood behind him, one set of steely fingers digging into his shoulder, the other poising the long gun barrel.

Hawkston poured out a glass of brandy and thrust it to his lips. Dirdar gulped mechanically, and the glassiness faded out of his eyes.

“He’s coming around,” grunted Hawkston. “You hit him hard, Krakovitch. Shut up, Ortelli! Tie a rag about your bally leg and quit groaning about it! Well, Dirdar, are you ready to talk?”

The Arab looked about like a trapped animal, his lean chest heaving under the torn *gumbaz*. He saw no mercy in the flinty faces about

him.

“Let’s burn his cursed feet,” snarled Ortelli, busy with an improvised bandage. “Let me put the hot irons to the swine —”

Dirdar shuddered and his gaze sought the face of the Englishman with burning intensity. He knew that Hawkston was leader of these lawless men by virtue of sharp wits and a sledgelike fist.

The Arab licked his lips.

“As Allah is my witness, I do not know where Al Wazir is!”

“You lie!” snapped the Englishman. “We know that you were one of the party that took him into the desert — and he never came back. We know you know where he was left. Now, are you going to tell?”

“El Borak will kill me!” muttered Dirdar.

“Who’s El Borak?” rumbled Van Brock.

“American,” snapped Hawkston. “Adventurer. Real name’s Gordon. He led the caravan that took Al Wazir into the desert. Dirdar, you needn’t fear El Borak. We’ll protect you from him.”

A new gleam entered the Arab’s shifty eyes; avarice mingled with the fear already there. Those beady eyes grew cunning and cruel.

“There is only one reason why you wish to find Al Wazir,” he said. “You hope to learn the secret of a treasure richer than the secret hoard of Shahrazar the Forbidden! Well, suppose I tell you? Suppose I even guide you to the spot where Al Wazir is to be found — will you protect me from El Borak — will you give me a share of the Blood of the Gods?”

Hawkston frowned, and Ortelli ripped out an oath.

“Promise the dog nothing! Burn the soles off his feet! Here! I’ll heat the irons!”

“Let that alone!” said Hawkston with an oath. “One of you had better go to the door and watch. I saw that old devil Salim sneaking around through the alleys just before sundown.”

No one obeyed. They did not trust their leader. He did not repeat the command. He turned to Dirdar, in whose eyes greed was much stronger now than fear.

“How do I know you’d guide us right? Every man in that caravan swore an oath he’d never betray Al Wazir’s hiding place.”

“Oaths were made to be broken,” answered Dirdar cynically. “For a share in the Blood of the Gods I would forswear Mohammed. But even when you have found Al Wazir, you may not be able to learn the secret of the treasure.”

“We have ways of making men talk,” Hawkston assured him grimly. “Will you put our skill to the test, or will you guide us to Al Wazir? We will give you a share of the treasure.” Hawkston had no intention of keeping his word as he spoke.

“Mashallah!” said the Arab. “He dwells alone in an all but inaccessible place. When I name it, you, at least, Hawkston *effendi*, will know how to reach it. But I can guide you by a shorter way which will save two days. And a day on the desert is often the difference between life and death.

“Al Wazir dwells in the Caves of El Khour — *arrrgh!”* His voice broke in a scream, and he threw up his hands, a sudden image of frantic terror, eyes glaring, teeth bared. Simultaneously the deafening report of a shot filled the hut, and Dirdar toppled from his chair, clutching at his breast. Hawkston whirled, caught a glimpse through the window of a smoking, black pistol barrel and a grim-bearded face. He fired at that face even as, with his left hand, he swept the candle from the table and plunged the hut into darkness.

His companions were cursing, yelling, falling over each other, but Hawkston acted with unerring decision. He plunged to the door of the hut, knocking aside somebody who stumbled into his path, and threw the door open. He saw a figure running across the road, into the shadows on the other side. He threw up his revolver, fired, and saw the figure sway and fall headlong, to be swallowed up by the

darkness under the trees. He crouched for an instant in the doorway, gun lifted, left arm barring the blundering rush of the other men.

“Keep back, curse you! That was old Salim. There may be more, under the trees across the road.”

But no menacing figure appeared, no sound mingled with the rustling of the palm leaves in the wind, except a noise that might have been a man flopping in his death throes — or dragging himself painfully away on hands and knees. This noise quickly ceased and Hawkston stepped cautiously out into the starlight.

No shot greeted his appearance, and instantly he became a dynamo of energy. He leaped back into the hut, snarling: “Van Brock, take Ortelli and look for Salim. I know I hit him. You’ll probably find him lying dead over there under the trees. If he’s still breathing, finish him! He was Al Wazir’s steward. We don’t want him taking tales to Gordon.”

Followed by Krakovitch, the Englishman groped his way into the darkened hut, struck a light and held it over the prostrate figure on the floor; it etched a gray face, staring, glassy eyes, and a naked breast in which showed a round blue hole from which the blood had already ceased to ooze.

“Shot through the heart!” swore Hawkston, clenching his fist. “Old Salim must have seen him with us and trailed him, guessing what we were after. The old devil shot him to keep him from guiding us to Al Wazir — but no matter. I don’t need any guide to get me to the Caves of El Khour — well?” The Dutchman and the Italian had entered.

Van Brock spoke: “We didn’t find the old dog. Smears of blood all over the grass, though. He must have been hard hit.”

“Let him go,” snarled Hawkston. “He’s crawled away to die somewhere. It’s a mile to the nearest occupied house. He won’t live to get that far. Come on! The camels and the men are ready. They’re behind that palm grove, south of this hut. Everything’s ready for the jump, just as I planned it. Let’s go!”

Soon thereafter there sounded the soft pad of camel's hoofs and the jingle of accouterments, as a line of mounted figures, ghostly in the night, moved westward into the desert. Behind them the flat roofs of el-Azem slept in the starlight, shadowed by the palm leaves which stirred in the breeze that blew from the Persian Gulf.

II

Gordon's thumb was hooked easily in his belt, keeping his hand near the butt of his heavy pistol, as he rode leisurely through the starlight. His gaze swept the palms which lined each side of the road, their broad fronds rattling in the faint breeze. He did not expect an ambush or the appearance of an enemy. He had no blood feud with any man in el-Azem. And yonder, a hundred yards ahead of him, stood the flat-roofed, wall-encircled house of his friend, Achmet ibn Mitkhal, where the American was living as an honored guest.

For years El Borak had carried his life in his hands, and if there were hundreds of men in Arabia proud to call him friend, there were hundreds of others who would have given the teeth out of their heads for a clean sight of him, etched against the stars, over the barrel of a rifle.

Gordon reached the gate and was about to call to the gatekeeper when it swung open, and the portly figure of his host emerged.

"Allah be with thee, El Borak! I was beginning to fear some enemy had laid an ambush for you. Is it wise to ride alone, by night, when within a three days' ride dwell men who bear blood feud with you?"

Gordon swung down and handed his reins to a groom who had followed his master out of the compound. The American was not a large man, but he was square-shouldered and deep-chested, with corded sinews and steely nerves which had been tempered and honed by the tooth-and-nail struggle for survival in the wild

outlands of the world. His black eyes gleamed in the starlight like those of some untamed son of the wilderness.

"I think my enemies have decided to let me die of old age or inertia," he replied. "There has not been —"

"What's that?" Achmet ibn Mitkhal had his own enemies. In an instant the curious dragging, choking sounds he had heard beyond the nearest angle of the wall had transformed him into a tense image of suspicion and menace.

Gordon had heard the sounds as quickly as his Arab host, and he turned with the smooth speed of a cat, the big pistol appearing in his right hand as if by magic. He took a single quick stride toward the angle of the wall — then around that angle came a strange figure, with torn, trailing garments. A man, crawling slowly and painfully along on his hands and knees. As he crawled he gasped and panted with a grisly whistling and gagging in his breathing. As they stared at him, he slumped down almost at their feet, turning a blood-streaked visage to the starlight.

"Salim!" ejaculated Gordon softly, and with one stride he was at the angle, staring around it, pistol poised. No living thing met his eye; only an expanse of bare ground, barred by the shadows of the palms. He turned back to the prostrate man, over whom Achmet was already bending.

"Effendi!" panted the old man. "El Borak!"

Gordon dropped to his knee beside him, and Salim's bony fingers clenched desperately on his arm.

"A *hakim*, quick, Achmet!" snapped Gordon.

"Nay," gasped Salim. "I am dying and —"

"Who shot you, Salim?" asked Gordon, for he had already ascertained the nature of the wound which dyed the old man's tattered *abba* with crimson.

"Hawkston — the Englishman." The words came with an effort. "I saw him — the three rogues who follow him — beguiling that fool Dirdar to the deserted hut near Mekmet's Pool. I followed for I knew

— they meant no good. Dirdar was a dog. He drank liquor — like an infidel. El Borak! He betrayed Al Wazir! In spite of his oath. I shot him — through the window — but not in time. He will never guide them — but he told Hawkston — of the Caves of El Khour. I saw their caravan — camels — seven Arab servants. El Borak! They have departed — for the Caves — the Caves of El Khour!"

"Don't worry about them, Salim," replied Gordon, responding to the urgent appeal in the glazing eyes. "They'll never lay hand on Al Wazir. I promise you."

"Al Hamdu Lillah," whispered the old Arab, and with a spasm that brought frothy blood to his bearded lips, his grim old face set in iron lines, and he was dead before Gordon could ease his head to the ground.

The American stood up and looked down at the silent figure. Achmet came close to him and tugged his sleeve.

"Al Wazir!" murmured Achmet. *"Wallah!* I thought men had forgotten all about that man. It is more than a year now since he disappeared."

"White men don't forget — not when there's loot in the offing," answered Gordon sardonically. "All up and down the coast men are still looking for the Blood of the Gods. Those marvelous matched rubies were Al Wazir's especial pride, and disappeared when he forsook the world and went into the desert to live as a hermit, seeking the way to truth through meditation and self-denial."

Achmet shivered and glanced westward where, beyond the belt of palms, the shadowy desert stretched vast and mysterious to mingle its immensity with the dimness of the starlit night.

"A hard way to seek truth," said Achmet, who was a lover of the soft things and the rich things of life.

"Al Wazir was a strange man," answered Gordon. "But his servants loved him. Old Salim there, for instance. Good Heavens, Mekmet's Pool is more than a mile from here. Salim crawled —

crawled all that way, shot through and through. He knew Hawkston would torture Al Wazir — maybe kill him. Achmet, have my racing camel saddled —"

"I'll go with you!" exclaimed Achmet. "How many men will we need? You heard Salim — Hawkston will have at least eleven men with him —"

"We couldn't catch him now," answered Gordon. "He's got too much of a start on us. His camels are *hejin* — racing camels — too. I'm going to the Caves of El Khour, alone."

"But —"

"They'll go by the caravan road that leads to Riyadh; I'm going to the Well of Amir Khan."

Achmet blanched.

"Amir Khan lies within the country of Shalan ibn Mansour, who hates you as an *imam* hates *Shaitan* the Damned!"

"Perhaps none of his tribe will be at the well," answered Gordon. "I'm the only Feringi who knows of that route. If Dirdar told Hawkston about it, the Englishman couldn't find it without a guide. I can get to the caves two days ahead of Hawkston. I'm going alone, because we couldn't take enough men to whip the Ruweila if they're on the warpath. One man has a better chance of slipping through than a score. I'm not going to fight Hawkston — not now. I'm going to warn Al Wazir. We'll hide until Hawkston gives up and comes back to el-Azem. Then, when he's gone, I'll return by the caravan road."

Achmet shouted an order to the men who were gathering just within the gate, and they scampered to do his bidding.

"You will go disguised, at least?" he urged.

"No. It wouldn't do any good. Until I get into Ruweila country I won't be in any danger, and after that a disguise would be useless. The Ruweila kill and plunder every stranger they catch, whether Christian or Mohammedan."

He strode into the compound to oversee the saddling of the white racing camel.

“I’m riding as light as possible,” he said. “Speed means everything. The camel won’t need any water until we reach the well. After that it’s not a long jump to the caves. Load on just enough food and water to last me to the well, with economy.”

His economy was that of a true son of the desert. Neither water skin nor food bag was overheavy when the two were slung on the high rear pommel. With a brief word of farewell, Gordon swung into the saddle, and at the tap of his bamboo stick the beast lurched to its feet. “Yah!” Another tap and it swung into motion. Men pulled the compound gate open and stood aside, their eyes gleaming in the torchlight.

“Bismillahi er rahmani er rahhim!” quoth Achmet resignedly, lifting his hands in a gesture of benediction, as the camel and its rider faded into the night.

“He rides to death,” muttered a bearded Arab.

“Were it another man I should agree,” said Achmet. “But it is El Borak who rides. Yet Shalan ibn Mansour would give many horses for his head.”

The sun was swinging low over the desert, a tawny stretch of rocky soil and sand as far as Gordon could see in every direction. The solitary rider was the only visible sign of life, but Gordon’s vigilance was keen. Days and nights of hard riding lay behind him; he was coming into the Ruweila country now, and every step he took increased his danger. The Ruweila, whom he believed to be kin to the powerful Roualla of El Hamad, were true sons of Ishmael — hawks of the desert, whose hands were against every man not of their clan. To avoid their country, the regular caravan road to the west swung wide to the south. This was an easy route, with wells a day’s march apart. And it passed within a day’s ride of the Caves of El Khour, the catacombs which pit a low range of hills rising sheer out of the wastelands.

Few white men know of their existence, but evidently Hawkston knew of the ancient trail that turned northward from the Well of Khosru on the caravan road. Hawkston was perforce approaching El Khour circuitously. Gordon was heading straight westward, across waterless wastes, cut by a trace so faint only an Arab or El Borak could have followed it. On that route there was but one watering place, between the fringe of oases along the coast and the caves — the half-mythical Well of Amir Khan, the existence of which was a secret, jealously guarded by the Bedouins.

There was no fixed habitation at the oasis, which was but a clump of palms, watered by a small spring, but frequently bands of Ruweila camped there. That was a chance he must take. He hoped they were driving their camel herds somewhere far to the north, in the heart of their country; but, like true hawks, they ranged far afield, striking at the caravans and the outlying villages.

The trail he was following was so slight that few would have recognized it as such. It stretched dimly away before him over a level expanse of stone-littered ground, broken on one hand by sand dunes, on the other by a succession of low ridges. He glanced at the sun, and tapped the water skin that swung from the saddle. There was little left, though he had practiced the grim economy of a Bedouin or a wolf. But within a few hours he would be at the Well of Amir Khan, where he would replenish his supply — though his nerves tightened at the thought of what might be waiting for him there.

Even as the thought passed through his mind, the sun struck a glint from something on the crest of the nearer sand dunes, and simultaneously there rang out the crack of a rifle and he heard the thud of the bullet into flesh. The camel leaped convulsively and came down in a headlong sprawl, shot through the heart. Gordon leaped free as it fell, and in an instant was crouching behind the carcass, watching the crest of the dune over the barrel of his rifle. A strident yell greeted the fall of the camel, and another shot set the echoes barking. The bullet ploughed into the ground beside Gordon’s stiffening breastwork, and the American replied. Dust

spurted into the air, so near the muzzle that gleamed on the crest that it evoked a volley of lurid oaths in a choked voice.

The black glittering ring was withdrawn, and presently there rose the rapid drum of hoofs. Gordon saw a white *kafieh* bobbing among the dunes, and understood the Bedouin's plan. Apparently there was only one man. That man intended to circle Gordon's position, cross the trail a few hundred yards west of him and get on the rising ground behind the American, where his vantage-point position would allow him to shoot over the bulk of the camel — for, of course, he knew Gordon would keep the dead beast between them.

But Gordon shifted himself only enough to command the trail ahead of him, the open space the Arab must cross after leaving the dunes, before he reached the protection of the ridges. He rested his rifle across the forelegs of the camel. A quarter of a mile up the trail there was a sandstone rock jutting up in the skyline. Anyone crossing the trail between it and himself would be limned against it momentarily. He set his sights and drew a bead against that rock. He was betting that the Bedouin was alone, and that he would not withdraw to any great distance before making the dash across the trail.

Even as he meditated a white-clad figure burst from among the ridges and raced across the trail, bending low in the saddle and flogging his mount. It was a long shot, but Gordon's nerves did not quiver. At the exact instant that the white-clad figure was limned against the distant rock, the American pulled the trigger. For a fleeting moment he thought he had missed; then the rider straightened convulsively, threw up two wide-sleeved arms and reeled back drunkenly. The frightened horse reared high, throwing the man heavily. In an instant the landscape showed two separate shapes where there had been one — a bundle of white sprawling on the ground, and a horse racing off southward.

Gordon lay motionless for a few minutes, too wary to expose himself. He knew the man was dead; the fall alone would have killed him. But there was a slight chance that other riders might be lurking among the sand dunes.

The sun beat down savagely; vultures appeared from nowhere — black dots in the sky, swinging in great circles, lower and lower. There was no hint of movement among the ridges or the dunes.

Gordon rose and glanced down at the dead camel. His jaws set a trifle more grimly; that was all. But he realized what the killing of his steed meant. He looked westward, where the heat waves shimmered. It would be a long walk, a long, dry walk, before it ended.

Stooping, he unslung water skin and food bag and threw them over his shoulder. Rifle in hand he went up the trail with a steady, swinging stride that would eat up the miles and carry him for hour after hour without faltering.

When he came to the shape sprawling in the path, he set the butt of his rifle on the ground and stood briefly, one hand steadying the bags on his shoulder. The man he had killed was a Ruweila, right enough; one of the tall, sinewy, hawk-faced and wolf-hearted plunderers of the southern desert. Gordon's bullet had caught him just below the armpit. That the man had been alone, and on a horse instead of a camel, meant that there was a larger party of his tribesmen somewhere in the vicinity. Gordon shrugged his shoulders, shifted the rifle to the crook of his arm and moved on up the trail. The score between himself and the men of Shalan ibn Mansour was red enough already. It might well be settled once and for all at the Well of Amir Khan.

As he swung along the trail he kept thinking of the man he was going to warn: Al Wazir, the Arabs called him, because of his former capacity with the Sultan of Oman. A Russian nobleman, in reality, wandering over the world in search of some mystical goal Gordon had never understood, just as an unquenchable thirst for adventure drove El Borak around the planet.

But the dreamy soul of the Slav coveted something more than material things. Al Wazir had been many things. Wealth, power, position, all had slipped through his unsatisfied fingers. He had delved deep in strange religions and philosophies, seeking the answer to the riddle of existence, as Gordon sought the stimulation of hazard. The mysticisms of the Sufis had attracted him, and finally the ascetic mysteries of the Hindus.

A year before Al Wazir had been governor of Oman, next to the sultan the wealthiest and most powerful man on the Pearl Coast. Without warning he had given up his position and disappeared. Only a chosen few knew that he had distributed his vast wealth among the poor, renounced all ambition and power, and gone like an ancient prophet to dwell in the desert, where, in the solitary meditations and self-denials of a true ascetic, he hoped to read at last the eternal riddle of life — as the ancient prophets read it. Gordon had accompanied him on that last journey, with the handful of faithful servants who knew their master's intentions — old Salim

among them; for between the dreamy philosopher and the hard-bitten man of action there existed a powerful tie of friendship.

But for the traitor and fool, Dirdar, Al Wazir's secret had been well kept. Gordon knew that ever since Al Wazir's disappearance, adventurers of every breed had been searching for him, hoping to secure possession of the treasure that the Russian had possessed in the days of his power — the wonderful collection of perfectly matched rubies, known as the Blood of the Gods, which had blazed a lurid path through Oriental history for six hundred years.

These jewels had not been distributed among the poor with the rest of Al Wazir's wealth. Gordon himself did not know what the man had done with them. Nor did the American care. Greed was not one of his faults. And Al Wazir was his friend.

The blazing sun rocked slowly down the sky, its flame turned to molten copper; it touched the desert rim, and etched against it, a crawling black tiny figure, Gordon moved grimly on, striding inexorably into the somber immensities of the *Ruba al Khali* — the Empty Abodes.

III

Etched against a white streak of dawn, motionless as figures on a tapestry, Gordon saw the clump of palms that marked the Well of Amir Khan grow up out of the fading night.

A few moments later he swore, softly. Luck, the fickle jade, was not with him this time. A faint ribbon of blue smoke curled up against the whitening sky. There were men at the Well of Amir Khan.

Gordon licked his dry lips. The water skin that slapped against his back at each stride was flat, empty. The distance he would have covered in a matter of hours, skimming over the desert on the back of his tireless camel, had taken him the trudging of a whole night, though he had held a gait that few of the desert's sons could have maintained unbroken. Even for him, in the coolness of the night, it

had been a hard trek, though his iron muscles resisted fatigue like a wolf's.

Far to the west a low, blue line lay on the horizon. It was the range of hills that held the Caves of El Khour. He was still ahead of Hawkston, forging on somewhere far to the south. But the Englishman would be gaining on him at every stride.

Gordon could swing wide to avoid the men at the well and trudge on. Trudge on, afoot, and with empty water bag? It would be suicide. He could never reach the caves on foot and without water. Already he was bitten by the devils of thirst.

A red flame grew in his eyes, and his dark face set in wolfish lines. Water was life in the desert; life for him and for Al Wazir. There was water at the well, and camels. There were men, his enemies, in possession of both. If they lived, he must die. It was the law of the wolf pack, and of the desert. He slipped the limp bags from his shoulder, cocked his rifle and went forward to kill or be killed—not for gold, nor the love of a woman, nor an ideal, nor a dream, but for as much water as could be carried in a goatskin bag.

A *wadi* or gully broke the plain ahead of him, meandering to a point within a few hundred feet of the well. Gordon crept toward it, taking advantage of every bit of cover. He had almost reached it, at a point a hundred yards from the well, when a man in white *kafieh* and ragged *abba* materialized from among the palms. Discovery in the growing light was instant. The Arab yelled and fired. The bullet knocked up dust a foot from Gordon's knee, as he crouched on the edge of the gully, and he fired back. The Arab cried out, dropped his rifle and staggered drunkenly back among the palms.

The next instant Gordon had sprung down into the gully and was moving swiftly and carefully along it, toward the point where it bent nearest the well. He glimpsed white-clad figures flitting briefly among the trees, and then rifles began to crack viciously. Bullets sang over the gully as the men fired from behind their saddles and bales of goods, piled like a rampart among the stems of the palms. They lay in the eastern fringe of the clump; the camels, Gordon

knew, were on the other side of the trees. From the volume of the firing it could not be a large party.

A rock on the edge of the gully provided cover. Gordon thrust his rifle barrel under a jutting corner of it and watched for movement among the palms. Fire spurted and a bullet whined off the rock — *zingggg* — dwindling in the distance like the dry whir of a rattler. Gordon fired at the puff of smoke and a defiant yell answered him.

His eyes were slits of black flame. A fight like this could last for days. And he could not endure a siege. He had no water; he had no time. A long march to the south the caravan of Hawkston was swinging relentlessly westward, each step carrying them nearer the Caves of El Khour and the unsuspecting man who dreamed his dreams there. A few hundred feet away from Gordon there was water, and camels that would carry him swiftly to his destination; but lead-fanged wolves of the desert lay between.

Lead came at his retreat, thick and fast, and vehement voices rained maledictions on him. They let him know they knew he was alone, and on foot, and probably half mad with thirst. They howled jeers and threats. But they did not expose themselves. They were confident but wary, with the caution taught by the desert deep ingrained in them. They held the winning hand and they intended to keep it so.

An hour of this, and the sun climbed over the eastern rim, and the heat began — the molten, blinding heat of the southern desert. It was fierce already; later it would be scorching hell in that unshielded gully. Gordon licked his blackened lips and staked his life and the life of Al Wazir on one desperate cast of Fate's blind dice.

Recognizing and accepting the terrible odds against success, he raised himself high enough to expose head and one shoulder above the gully rim, firing as he did so. Three rifles cracked together and lead hummed about his ears; the bullet of one raked a white-hot line across his upper arm. Instantly Gordon cried out, the loud agonized cry of a man hard hit, and threw his arms above the rim of the gully

in the convulsive gesture of a man suddenly death-stricken. One hand held the rifle and the motion threw it out of the gully, to fall ten feet away, in plain sight of the Arabs.

An instant's silence, in which Gordon crouched below the rim, then bloodthirsty yells echoed his cry. He dared not raise himself high enough to look, but he heard the *slap-slap-slap* of sandaled feet, winged by hate and blood lust. They had fallen for his ruse. Why not? A crafty man might feign a wound and fall, but who would deliberately cast away his rifle? The thought of a Feringi, lying helpless and badly wounded in the bottom of the gully, with a defenseless throat ready for the knife, was too much for the blood lust of the Bedouins. Gordon held himself in iron control until the swift feet were only a matter of yards away — then he came erect like a steel spring released, the big automatic in his hand.

As he leaped up he caught one split-second glimpse of three Arabs, halting dead in their tracks, wild-eyed at the unexpected apparition — even as he straightened his gun was roaring. One man spun on his heel and fell in a crumpled heap, shot through the head. Another fired once, with a rifle, from the hip, without aim. An instant later he was down, with a slug through his groin and another ripping through his breast as he fell. And then Fate took a hand again — Fate in the form of a grain of sand in the mechanism of Gordon's automatic. The gun jammed just as he threw it down on the remaining Arab.

This man had no gun; only a long knife. With a howl he wheeled and legged it back for the grove, his rags whipping on the wind of his haste. And Gordon was after him like a starving wolf. His strategy might go for nothing if the man got back among the trees, where he might have left a rifle.

The Bedouin ran like an antelope, but Gordon was so close behind him when they reached the trees that the Arab had no time to snatch up the rifle leaning against the improvised rampart. He wheeled at bay, yowling like a mad dog, and slashing with the long

knife. The point tore Gordon's shirt as the American dodged, and brought down the heavy pistol on the Arab's head. The thick *kafieh* saved the man's skull from being crushed, but his knees buckled and he went down, throwing his arms about Gordon's waist and dragging the white man down as he fell. Somewhere on the other side of the grove the wounded man was calling down curses on El Borak.

The two men rolled on the ground, ripping and smiting like wild animals. Gordon struck once again with his gun barrel, a glancing blow that laid open the Arab's face from eye to jaw, and then dropped the jammed pistol and caught at the arm that wielded the knife. He got a grip with his left hand on the wrist and the guard of the knife itself, and with his other hand began to fight for a throat hold. The Arab's ghastly, blood-smeared countenance writhed in a tortured grin of muscular strain. He knew the terrible strength that lurked in El Borak's iron fingers; knew that if they closed on his throat they would not let go until his jugular was torn out.

He threw his body frantically from side to side, wrenching and tearing. The violence of his efforts sent both men rolling over and over, to crash against palm stems and carom against saddles and bales. Once Gordon's head was driven hard against a tree, but the blow did not weaken him, nor did the vicious drive the Arab got in with a knee to his groin. The Bedouin grew frantic, maddened by the fingers that sought his throat, the dark face, inexorable as iron, that glared into his own. Somewhere on the other side of the grove a pistol was barking, but Gordon did not feel the tear of lead, nor hear the whistle of bullets.

With a shriek like a wounded panther's, the Arab whirled over again, a knot of straining muscles, and his hand, thrown out to balance himself, fell on the barrel of the pistol Gordon had dropped. Quick as a flash he lifted it, just as Gordon found the hold he had been seeking, and crashed the butt down on the American's head with every ounce of strength in his lean sinews, backed by the fear of death. A tremor ran through the American's iron frame, and his

head fell forward. And in that instant the Ruweila tore free like a wolf breaking from a trap, leaving his long knife in Gordon's hand.

Even before Gordon's brain cleared, his war-trained muscles were responding instinctively. As the Ruweila sprang up, he shook his head and rose more slowly, the long knife in his hand. The Arab hurled the pistol at him, and caught up the rifle which leaned against the barrier. He gripped it by the barrel with both hands and wheeled, whirling the stock above his head; but before the blow could fall, Gordon struck with all the blinding speed that had earned him his name among the tribes.

Under the descending butt he lunged, and his knife, driven with all his strength and the momentum of his charge, plunged into the Arab's breast and drove him back against a tree, into which the blade sank a hand's breadth deep. The Bedouin cried out, a thick, choking cry that death cut short. An instant he sagged against the haft, dead on his feet and nailed upright to the palm tree. Then his knees buckled and his weight tore the knife from the wood. He pitched into the sand.

Gordon wheeled, shaking the sweat from his eyes, glaring about for the fourth man — the wounded man. The furious fight had taken only a few minutes. The pistol was still cracking dryly on the other side of the trees, and an animal scream of pain mingled with the reports.

With a curse Gordon caught up the Arab's rifle and burst through the grove. The wounded man lay under the shade of the trees, propped on an elbow, and aiming his pistol — not at El Borak, but at the one camel that still lived. The other three lay stretched in their blood. Gordon sprang at the man, swinging the rifle stock. He was a second too late. The shot cracked and the camel moaned and crumpled even as the butt fell on the lifted arm, snapping the bone like a twig. The smoking pistol fell into the sand and the Arab sank back, laughing like a ghoul.

“Now see if you can escape from the Well of Amir Khan, El Borak!” he gasped. “The riders of Shalan ibn Mansour are out! Tonight or tomorrow they will return to the well! Will you await them here, or flee on foot to die in the desert, or be tracked down like a wolf? *Ya kalb!* Forgotten of Allah! They will hang thy skin on a palm tree! *Laan’ abuk*—”

Lifting himself with an effort that spattered his beard with bloody foam, he spat toward Gordon, laughed croakingly, and fell back, dead before his head hit the ground.

Gordon stood like a statue, staring down at the dying camels. The dead man’s vengeance was grimly characteristic of his race. Gordon lifted his head and looked long at the low, blue range on the western horizon. Unerringly the dying Arab had foretold the grim choice left him. He could wait at the well until Shalan ibn Mansour’s wild riders returned and wiped him out by force of numbers, or he could plunge into the desert again on foot. And whether he awaited certain doom at the well or sought the uncertain doom of the desert, inexorably Hawkston would be marching westward, steadily cutting down the lead Gordon had had at the beginning.

But Gordon never had any doubt concerning his next move. He drank deep at the well and bolted some of the food the Arabs had been preparing for their breakfast. Some dried dates and crusted cheese balls he placed in a food bag, and he filled a water skin from the well. He retrieved his rifle, got the sand out of his automatic and buckled to his belt a scimitar from the girdle of one of the men he had killed. He had come into the desert intending to run and hide, not to fight. But it looked very much as if he would do much more fighting before this venture was over, and the added weight of the sword was more than balanced by the feeling of added security in the touch of the lean, curved blade.

Then he slung the water skin and food bag over his shoulder, took up his rifle and strode out of the shadows of the grove into the molten heat of the desert day. He had not slept at all the night before. His short rest at the well had put new life and spring into his resilient muscles, hardened and toughened by an incredibly

strenuous life. But it was a long, long march to the Caves of El Khour, under a searing sun. Unless some miracle occurred, he could not hope to reach them before Hawkston now. And before another sunrise the riders of Shalan ibn Mansour might well be on his trail, in which case — but all he had ever asked of Fortune was a fighting chance.

The sun rocked its slow, torturing way up and down the sky; twilight deepened into dusk, and the desert stars winked out; and on, grimly on, plodded that solitary figure, pitting an indomitable will against the merciless immensity of thirst-haunted desolation.

IV

The caves of El Khour pit the sheer eastern walls of a gaunt hill range that rises like a stony backbone out of a waste of rocky plains. There is only one spring in the hills; it rises in a cave high up in the wall and curls down the steep rocky slope, a slender thread of silver, to empty into a broad, shallow pool below. The sun was hanging like a blood-red ball above the western desert when Francis Xavier Gordon halted near this pool and scanned the rows of gaping cave mouths with bloodshot eyes. He licked heat-blackened lips with a tongue from which all moisture had been baked. Yet there was still a little water in the skin on his shoulder. He had economized on that grueling march, with the savage economy of the wilderness-bred.

It seemed a bit hard to realize he had actually reached his goal. The hills of El Khour had shimmered before him for so many miles, unreal in the heat waves, until at last they had seemed like a mirage, a fantasy of a thirst-maddened imagination. The desert sun plays tricks even with a brain like Gordon's. Slowly, slowly the hills had grown up before him — now he stood at the foot of the easternmost cliff, frowning up at the tiers of caves which showed their black mouths in even rows.

Nightfall had not brought Shalan ibn Mansour's riders swooping after the solitary wanderer, nor had dawn brought them. Again and again through the long, hot day, Gordon had halted on some rise

and looked back, expecting to see the dust of the hurrying camels; but the desert had stretched empty to the horizon.

And now it seemed another miracle had taken place, for there were no signs of Hawkston and his caravan. Had they come and gone? They would have at least watered their camels at the pool; and from the utter lack of signs about it, Gordon knew that no one had camped or watered animals at the pool for many moons. No, it was indisputable, even if unexplainable. Something had delayed Hawkston, and Gordon had reached the caves ahead of him after all.

The American dropped on his belly at the pool and sank his face into the cool water. He lifted his head presently, shook it like a lion shaking his mane, and leisurely washed the dust from his face and hands.

Then he rose and went toward the cliff. He had seen no sign of life, yet he knew that in one of those caves lived the man he had come to seek. He lifted his voice in a far-carrying shout.

"Al Wazir! Ho there, Al Wazir!"

"Wazirrr!" whispered the echo back from the cliff. There was no other answer. The silence was ominous. With his rifle ready, Gordon went toward the narrow trail that wound up the rugged face of the cliff. Up this he climbed, keenly scanning the caves. They pitted the whole wall, in even tiers — too even to be the chance work of nature. They were man-made. Thousands of years ago, in the dim dawn of pre-history they had served as dwelling places for some race of people who were not mere savages, who niched their caverns in the softer strata with skill and cunning. Gordon knew the caves were connected by narrow passages, and that only by this ladderlike path he was following could they be reached from below.

The path ended at a long ledge, upon which all the caves of the lower tier opened. In the largest of these Al Wazir had taken up his abode.

Gordon called again, without result. He strode into the cave, and there he halted. It was square in shape. In the back wall and in each side wall showed a narrow doorlike opening. Those at the sides led

into adjoining caves. That at the back led into a smaller cavern, without any other outlet. There, Gordon remembered, Al Wazir had stored the dried and tinned foods he had brought with him. He had brought no furniture, nor weapons.

In one corner of the square cave a heap of charred fragments indicated that a fire had once been built there. In one corner lay a heap of skins — Al Wazir's bed. Near by lay the one book Al Wazir had brought with him — *The Bhagavat-Gita*. But of the man himself there was no evidence.

Gordon went into the storeroom, struck a match and looked about him. The tins of food were there, though the supply was considerably depleted. But they were not stacked against the wall in neat columns as Gordon had seen them stowed under Al Wazir's directions. They were tumbled and scattered about all over the floor, with open and empty tins among them. This was not like Al Wazir, who placed a high value on neatness and order, even in small things. The rope he had brought along to aid him in exploring the caves lay coiled in one corner.

Gordon, extremely puzzled, returned to the square cave. Here he had fully expected to find Al Wazir sitting in tranquil meditation, or out on the ledge meditating over the sunset desert. Where was the man?

He was certain that Al Wazir had not wandered away to perish in the desert. There was no reason for him to leave the caves. If he had simply tired of his lonely life and taken his departure, he would have taken the book that was lying on the floor, his inseparable companion. There was no bloodstain on the floor, or anything to indicate that the hermit had met a violent end. Nor did Gordon believe that any nomad, even the Ruweila, would molest the "holy man." Anyway, if Arabs had done away with Al Wazir, they would have taken away the rope and the tins of food. And he was certain that, until Hawkston learned of it, no white man but himself had known of Al Wazir's whereabouts.

He searched through the lower tiers of caves without avail. The sun had sunk out of sight behind the hills, whose long shadows streamed far eastward across the desert, and deepening shadows filled the caverns. The silence and the mystery began to weigh on Gordon's nerves. He began to be irked by the feeling that unseen eyes were watching him. Men who live lives of constant peril develop certain obscure faculties or instincts to a keenness unknown to those lapped about by the securities of civilization.

As he passed through the caves, Gordon repeatedly felt an impulse to turn suddenly, to try to surprise those eyes that seemed to be boring into his back. At last he did wheel suddenly, thumb pressing back the hammer of his rifle, eyes alert for any movement in the growing dusk. The shadowy chambers and passages stood empty before him.

Once, as he passed a dark passageway he could have sworn he heard a soft noise, like the stealthy tread of a bare, furtive foot. He stepped to the mouth of the tunnel and called, without conviction: "Is that you, Ivan?" He shivered at the silence which followed; he had not really believed it was Al Wazir. He groped his way into the tunnel, rifle poked ahead of him. Within a few yards he encountered a blank wall; there seemed to be no entrance or exit except the doorway through which he had come. And the tunnel was empty, save for himself.

He returned to the ledge before the caves, in disgust.

"Hell, am I getting jumpy?"

But a grisly thought kept recurring to him — recollection of the Bedouins' belief that a supernatural fiend lurked in these ancient caves and devoured any human foolish enough to be caught there by night. This thought kept recurring, together with the reflection that the Orient held many secrets, which the West would laugh at, but which often proved to be grim realities.

That would explain Al Wazir's mysterious absence. If some fiendish or bestial dweller in the caves had devoured him — Gordon's speculations revolved about a hypothetical rock python of

enormous size, dwelling for generations, perhaps centuries in the hills — that would explain the lack of any bloodstains. Abruptly he swore: “Damn! I’m going batty. There are no snakes like that in Arabia. These caves are getting on my nerves.”

It was a fact. There was a brooding weirdness about these ancient and forgotten caverns that roused uncanny speculations in Gordon’s predominantly Celtic mind. What race had occupied them, so long ago? What wars had they witnessed; against what fierce barbarians sweeping up from the south? What cruelties and intrigues had they known, what grim rituals of worship and human sacrifice? Gordon shrugged his shoulders, wishing he had not thought of human sacrifice. The idea fitted too well with the general atmosphere of these grim caverns.

Angry at himself, he returned to the big square cavern, which, he remembered, the Arabs called *Niss’rosh*, the Eagle’s Nest, for some reason or other. He meant to sleep in the caves that night, partly to overcome the aversion he felt toward them, partly because he did not care to be caught down on the plain in case Hawkston or Shalan ibn Mansour arrived in the night. There was another mystery. Why had they not reached the caves, one or both of them? The desert was a breeding place of mysteries, a twilight realm of fantasy.

Al Wazir, Hawkston and Shalan ibn Mansour — had the fabled *djinn* of the Empty Abodes snatched them up and flown away with them, leaving him the one man alive in all the vast desert? Such whims of imagination played through his exhausted brain, as, too weary to eat, he prepared for the night.

He put a large rock in the trail, poised precariously, which anyone climbing the path in the dark would be sure to dislodge. The noise would awaken him. He stretched himself on the pile of skins, painfully aware of the stress and strain of his long trek which had taxed even his iron frame to the utmost. He was asleep almost the instant he touched his rude bed.

It was because of this weariness of body and mind that he did not hear the velvet-footed approach of the thing that crept upon him in

the darkness. He woke only when taloned fingers clenched murderously on his throat and an inhuman voice whinnied sickening triumph in his ear.

Gordon's reflexes had been trained in a thousand battles. So now he was fighting for his life before he was awake enough to know whether it was an ape or a great serpent that had attacked him.

The fierce fingers had almost crushed his throat before he had a chance to tense his neck muscles. Yet those powerful muscles, even though relaxed, had saved his life. Even so, the attack was so stunning, the grasp so nearly fatal, that as they rolled over the floor Gordon wasted precious seconds trying to tear away the strangling hands by wrenching at the wrists.

Then as his fighting brain asserted itself, even through the red, thickening mists that were infolding him, he shifted his tactics, drove a savage knee into a hard-muscled belly, and getting his thumbs under the little finger of each crushing hand, bent them fiercely back.

No strength can resist that leverage. The unknown attacker let go, and instantly Gordon smashed a trip-hammer blow against the side of his head and rolled clear as the hard frame went momentarily limp. It was dark in the cave, so dark Gordon could not even see his antagonist.

He sprang to his feet, drawing his scimitar. He stood poised, tense, wondering uncomfortably if the thing could see in the dark, and scarcely breathing as he strained his ears.

At the first faint sound he sprang like a panther and slashed murderously at the noise. The blade cut only empty air; there was an incoherent cry, a shuffle of feet, then the rapidly receding pad of hurried footsteps. Whatever it was, it was in retreat. Gordon tried to follow it, ran into a blank wall, and by the time he had located the side door through which, apparently, the creature had fled, the sounds had faded out. The American struck a match and glared around, not expecting to see anything that would give him a clue to

the mystery. Nor did he. The rock floor of the cavern showed no footprint!

What manner of creature he had fought in the dark he did not know. Its body had not seemed hairy enough for an ape, though the head had been a tangled mass of hair. Yet it had not fought like a human being; he had felt its talons and teeth, and it was hard to believe that human muscles could have contained such iron strength as he had encountered. And the noises it had made had certainly not resembled the sounds a man makes, even in combat.

Gordon picked up his rifle and went out on the ledge. From the position of the stars, it was past midnight. He sat down on the ledge, with his back against the cliff wall. He did not intend to sleep, but he slept in spite of himself, and woke suddenly, to find himself on his feet, with every nerve tingling, and his skin crawling with the sensation that grim peril had crept close upon him.

Even as he wondered if a bad dream had awakened him, he glimpsed a vague shadow fading into the black mouth of a cave not far away. He threw up his rifle and the shot sent the echoes flying and ringing from cliff to cliff. He waited tensely, but neither saw nor heard anything else.

After that he sat with his rifle across his knees, every faculty alert. His position, he realized, was precarious. He was like a man marooned on a deserted island. It was a day's hard ride to the caravan road to the south. On foot it would take longer. He could reach it, unhindered — but unless Hawkston had abandoned the quest, which was not likely, the Englishman's caravan was moving along that road somewhere. If Gordon met it, alone and on foot — Gordon had no illusions about Hawkston! But there was still a greater danger — Shalan ibn Mansour. He did not know why the *shaykh* had not tracked him down already, but it was certain that Shalan, scouring the desert to find the man who slew his warriors at the Well of Amir Khan, would eventually run him down. When that

happened, Gordon did not wish to be caught out on the desert, on foot.

Here, in the caves, with water, food and shelter, he would have at least a fighting chance. If Hawkston and Shalan should chance to arrive at the same time — that offered possibilities. Gordon was a fighting man who depended on his wits as much as his sword, and he had set his enemies tearing at each other before. But there was a present menace to him, in the caves themselves, a menace he felt was the solution to the riddle of Al Wazir's fate. That menace he meant to drive to bay with the coming of daylight.

He sat there until dawn turned the eastern sky rose and white. With the coming of the light he strained his eyes into the desert, expecting to see a moving line of dots that would mean men on camels. But only the tawny, empty waste of levels and ridges met his gaze. Not until the sun was rising did he enter the caves; the level beams struck into them, disclosing features that had been veiled in the shadows the evening before.

He went first to the passage where he had first heard the sinister footfalls, and there he found the explanation to one mystery. A series of hand and foot holds, lightly niched in the stone of the wall, led up through a square hole in the rocky ceiling into the cave above. The *djinn* of the caves had been in that passage, and had escaped by that route, for some reason choosing flight rather than battle just then.

Now that he was rested, he became aware of the bite of hunger, and headed for the Eagle's Nest, to get his breakfast out of the tins before he pursued his exploration of the caves. He entered the wide chamber, lighted by the early sun which streamed through the door — and stopped dead.

A bent figure in the door of the storeroom wheeled erect, to face him. For an instant they both stood frozen. Gordon saw a man confronting him like an image of the primordial — naked, gaunt, with a great matted tangle of hair and beard, from which the eyes blazed weirdly. It might have been a caveman out of the dawn

centuries who stood there, a stone gripped in each brawny hand. But the high, broad forehead, half hidden under the thatch of hair, was not the slanting brow of a savage. Nor was the face, almost covered though it was by the tangled beard.

"Ivan!" ejaculated Gordon aghast, and the explanation of the mystery rushed upon him, with all its sickening implications. Al Wazir was a madman.

As if goaded by the sound of his voice, the naked man stared violently, cried out incoherently, and hurled the rock in his right hand. Gordon dodged and it shattered on the wall behind him with an impact that warned him of the unnatural power lurking in the maniac's thews.

Al Wazir was taller than Gordon, with a magnificent, broad-shouldered, lean-hipped torso, ridged with muscles. Gordon half turned and set his rifle against the wall, and as he did so, Al Wazir hurled the rock in his left hand, awkwardly, and followed it across the cave with a bound, shrieking frightfully, foam flying from his lips.

Gordon met him breast to breast, bracing his muscular legs against the impact, and Al Wazir grunted explosively as he was stopped dead in his tracks. Gordon pinioned his arms at his side, and a wild shriek broke from the madman's lips as he tore and plunged like a trapped animal.

His muscles were like quivering steel wires that writhed and knotted under Gordon's grasp. His teeth snapped beastlike at Gordon's throat, and as the American jerked back his head to escape them, Al Wazir tore loose his right arm, and whipped it over Gordon's left arm and down. Before the American could prevent it, he had grasped the scimitar hilt and torn the blade from its scabbard. Up and back went the long arm, with the sheen of naked steel, and Gordon, sensing death in the lifted sword, smashed his left fist to the madman's jaw. It was a short terrific hook that traveled little more than a foot, but it was like the jolt of a mule's kick.

Al Wazir's head snapped back between his shoulders under the impact, then fell limply forward on his breast. His legs gave way simultaneously and Gordon caught him and eased him to the rocky floor.

Leaving the limp form where it lay, Gordon went hurriedly into the storeroom and secured the rope. Returning to the senseless man he knotted it about his waist, then lifted him to a sitting position against a natural stone pillar at the back of the cave, passed the rope about the column and tied it with an intricate knot on the other side. The rope was too strong to be broken even by the superhuman strength of a maniac, and Al Wazir could not reach backward around the pillar to reach and untie the knot.

Then Gordon set to work reviving the man — no light task, for El Borak, with the peril of death upon him, had struck hard, with the drive and snap of steel-trap muscles.

But presently the eyes opened and gazed wildly around, flaring redly as they fixed on Gordon's face. The clawing hands with their long, black nails, came up and caught at Gordon's throat as the American drew back out of reach. Al Wazir made a convulsive effort to rise, then sank back and crouched, with his unwinking stare, his fingers making aimless motions. Gordon looked at him somberly, sick at his soul. What a miserable, revolting end to dreams and philosophies! Al Wazir had come into the desert seeking meditation and peace, and the visions of the ancient prophets; he had found horror and insanity. Gordon had come looking for a hermit philosopher, radiant with mellow wisdom; he had found a filthy, naked madman.

The American filled an empty tin with water and set it, with an opened tin of meat, near Al Wazir's hand. An instant later he dodged, as the mad hermit hurled the tins at him with all his power. Shaking his head in despair, Gordon went into the storeroom and broke his own fast. He had little heart to eat, with the ruin of that once-splendid personality before him, but the urgings of hunger would not be denied.

It was while thus employed that a sudden noise outside brought him to his feet, galvanized by the imminence of danger.

V

It was the rattling fall of the stone Gordon had placed in the path that had alarmed him. Someone was climbing up the winding trail! Snatching up his rifle he glided out on the ledge. One of his enemies had come at last.

Down at the pool a weary, dusty camel was drinking. On the path, a few feet below the ledge there stood a tall, wiry man in dust-stained boots and breeches, his torn shirt revealing his brown, muscular chest.

“Gordon!” this man ejaculated, staring amazedly into the black muzzle of the American’s rifle. “How the devil did you get here?” His hands were empty, resting on outcroppings of rock, just as he had halted in the act of climbing. His rifle was slung to his back, pistol and scimitar in their scabbards at his belt.

“Put up your hands, Hawkston,” ordered Gordon, and the Englishman obeyed.

“What are you doing here?” he repeated. “I left you in el-Azem —”

“Salim lived long enough to tell me what he saw in the hut by Mekmet’s Pool. I came by a road you know nothing about. Where are the other jackals?”

Hawkston shook the sweat beads from his sunburned forehead. He was above medium height, brown, hard as sole leather, with a dark hawklike face and a high-bridged predatory nose, arching over a thin, black mustache. A lawless adventurer, his scintillant gray eyes reflected a ruthless and reckless nature, and as a fighting man he was as notorious as was Gordon — more notorious in Arabia, for Afghanistan had been the stage for most of El Borak’s exploits.

“My men? Dead by now, I fancy. The Ruweila are on the warpath. Shalan ibn Mansour caught us at Sulaymen’s Well, with fifty men.

We made a barricade of our saddles among the palms and stood them off all day. Van Brock and three of our camel drivers were killed during the fighting, and Krakovitch was wounded. That night I took a camel and cleared out. I knew it was no use hanging on."

"You swine," said Gordon, without passion. He did not call Hawkston a coward. He knew that not cowardice, but a cynical determination to save his skin at all hazards had driven the English man to desert his wounded and beleaguered companions.

"There wasn't any use for us all to be killed," retorted Hawkston. "I believed one man could sneak away in the dark and I did. They rushed the camp just as I got clear. I heard them killing the others. Ortelli howled like a lost soul when they cut his throat — I knew they'd run me down long before I could reach the coast, so I headed for the caves — northwest across the open desert, leaving the road and Khosru's Well off to the south. It was a long, dry ride, and I made it more by luck than anything else. And now can I put my hands down?"

"You might as well," replied Gordon, the rifle at his shoulder never wavering. "In a few seconds it won't matter much to you where your hands are."

Hawkston's expression did not change. He lowered his hands, but kept them away from his belt.

"You mean to kill me?" he asked calmly.

"You murdered my friend Salim. You came here to torture and rob Al Wazir. You'd kill me if you got the chance. I'd be a fool to let you live."

"Are you going to shoot me in cold blood?"

"No. Climb up on the ledge. I'll give you any kind of an even break you want."

Hawkston complied, and a few seconds later stood facing the American. An observer would have been struck by a certain similarity between the two men. There was no facial resemblance,

but both were burned dark by the sun; both were built with the hard economy of rawhide and spring steel; and both wore the keen, hawklike aspect which is the common brand of men who live by their wits and courage out on the raw edges of the world.

Hawkston stood with his empty hands at his sides while Gordon faced him with rifle held hip-low, but covering his midriff.

“Rifles, pistols or swords?” asked the American. “They say you can handle a blade.”

“Second to none in Arabia,” answered Hawkston confidently. “But I’m not going to fight you, Gordon.”

“You will!” A red flame began to smolder in the black eyes. “I know you, Hawkston. You’ve got a slick tongue, and you’re treacherous as a snake. We’ll settle this thing here and now. Choose your weapons — or by Heaven, I’ll shoot you down in your tracks!”

Hawkston shook his head calmly.

“You wouldn’t shoot a man in cold blood, Gordon. I’m not going to fight you — yet. Listen, man, we’ll have plenty of fighting on our hands before long! Where’s Al Wazir?”

“That’s none of your business,” growled Gordon.

“Well, no matter. You know why I’m here. And I know you came here to stop me if you could. But just now you and I are in the same boat. Shalan ibn Mansour’s on my trail. I slipped through his fingers, as I said, but he picked up my tracks and was after me within a matter of hours. His camels were faster and fresher than mine, and he’s been slowly overhauling me. When I topped the tallest of those ridges to the south there, I saw his dust. He’ll be here within the next hour! He hates you as much as he does me. You need my help, and I need yours. With Al Wazir to help us, we can hold these caves indefinitely.”

Gordon frowned. Hawkston’s tale sounded plausible, and would explain why Shalan ibn Mansour had not come hot on the American’s trail, and why the Englishman had not arrived at the caves sooner. But Hawkston was such a snake-tongued liar it was

dangerous to trust him. The merciless creed of the desert said shoot him down without any more parley, and take his camel. Rested, it would carry Gordon and Al Wazir out of the desert. But Hawkston had gauged Gordon's character correctly when he said the American could not shoot a man in cold blood.

"Don't move," Gordon warned him, and holding the cocked rifle like a pistol in one hand, he disarmed Hawkston and ran a hand over him to see that he had no concealed weapons. If his scruples prevented him shooting his enemy, he was determined not to give that enemy a chance to get the drop on him. For he knew Hawkston had no such scruples.

"How do I know you're not lying?" he demanded.

"Would I have come here alone, on a wornout camel if I weren't telling the truth?" countered Hawkston. "We'd better hide that camel, if we can. If we should beat them off, we'll need it to get to the coast. Damn it, Gordon, your suspicion and hesitation will get our throats cut yet! Where's Al Wazir?"

"Turn and look into that cave," replied Gordon grimly.

Hawkston, his face suddenly sharp with suspicion, obeyed. As his eyes rested on the figure crouched against the column at the back of the cavern, his breath sucked in sharply.

"Al Wazir! What's the matter with him?"

"Too much loneliness, I reckon," growled Gordon. "He's stark mad. He couldn't tell you where to find the Blood of the Gods if you tortured him all day."

"Well, it doesn't matter much just now," muttered Hawkston callously. "Can't think of treasure when life itself is at stake. Gordon, you'd better believe me! We should be preparing for a siege, not standing here chinning. If Shalan ibn Mansour — *look!" He* started violently, his long arm stabbing toward the south.

Gordon did not turn at the exclamation. He stepped back instead, out of the Englishman's reach, and still covering the man, shifted his position so he could watch both Hawkston and the point of the

compass indicated. Southeastward the country was undulating, broken by barren ridges. Over the farthest ridge a string of white dots was pouring, and a faint dust haze billowed up in the air. Men on camels! A regular horde of them.

"The Ruweila!" exclaimed Hawkston. "They'll be here within the hour!"

"They may be men of yours," answered Gordon, too wary to accept anything not fully proved. Hawkston was as tricky as a fox; and to make a mistake on the desert meant death. "We'll hide that camel, though, just on the chance you're telling the truth. Go ahead of me down the trail."

Paying no attention to the Englishman's profanity, Gordon herded him down the path to the pool. Hawkston took the camel's rope and went ahead leading it, under Gordon's guidance. A few hundred yards north of the pool there was a narrow canyon winding deep into a break of the hills, and a short distance up this ravine Gordon showed Hawkston a narrow cleft in the wall, concealed behind a jutting boulder. Through this the camel was squeezed into a natural pocket, open at the top, roughly round in shape and about forty feet across.

"I don't know whether the Arabs know about this place or not," said Gordon. "But we'll have to take the chance that they won't find the beast."

Hawkston was nervous.

"Let's get back to the caves! They're coming like the wind. If they catch us in the open they'll shoot us like rabbits!"

He started back at a run and Gordon was close on his heels. But Hawkston's nervousness was justified. The white men had not quite reached the foot of the trail that led up to the caves when a low thunder of hoofs rose on their ears, and over the nearest ridge came a wild white-clad figure on a camel, waving a rifle. At the sight of them he yelled stridently and flogged his beast into a more furious

gallop, threw his rifle to his shoulder. Behind him man after man topped the ridge — Bedouins on *hejin* — white racing camels.

"Up the cliff, man!" yelled Hawkston, pale under his bronze. Gordon was already racing up the path, and behind him Hawkston panted and cursed, urging greater haste, where more speed was impossible. Bullets began to spatter against the cliff, and the foremost rider howled in bloodthirsty glee as he bore down swiftly upon them. He was many yards ahead of his companions, and he was a remarkable marksman for an Arab. Firing from the rocking, swaying saddle, he was clipping his targets close.

Hawkston yelped as he was stung by a flying sliver of rock, flaked off by a smashing slug.

"Damn you, Gordon!" he panted. "This is your fault — your bloody stubbornness — he'll pick us off like rabbits in —"

The oncoming rider was not more than three hundred yards from the foot of the cliff, and the rim of the ledge was ten feet above the climbers.

Gordon wheeled suddenly, threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired all in one motion, so quickly he did not even seem to take aim. But the Arab went out of his saddle like a man hit by lightning. Without pausing to note the result of his shot, Gordon raced on up the path, and an instant later he swarmed over the ledge, with Hawkston at his heels.

"Damndest shot I ever saw!" gasped the Englishman.

"There're your guns," grunted Gordon, throwing himself flat on the ledge. "Here they come!"

Hawkston snatched his weapons from the rock where Gordon had left them and followed the American's example.

The Arabs had not paused. They greeted the fall of their reckless leader with yells of hate, but they flogged their mounts and came on in a headlong rush. They meant to spring off at the foot of the trail and charge up it on foot. There were at least fifty of them.

The two men lying prone on the ledge above did not lose their heads. Veterans, both of them, of a thousand wild battles, they waited coolly until the first of the riders was within good range. Then they began firing, without haste and without error. At each shot a man tumbled headlong from his saddle or slumped forward on his mount's bobbing neck.

Not even Bedouins could charge into such a blast of destruction. The rush wavered, split, turned on itself — and in an instant the white-clad riders were turning their backs on the caves and flogging in the other direction as madly as they had come. Five of them would never charge again, and as they fled Hawkston drilled one of the rear men neatly between the shoulders.

They fell back beyond the first low, stone-littered ridge, and Hawkston shook his rifle at them and cursed them with virile eloquence.

"Desert scum! Try it again, you bounders!"

Gordon wasted no breath on words. Hawkston had told the truth, and Gordon knew he was in no danger of treachery from that source, for the present. Hawkston would not attack him as long as they were confronted by a common enemy — but he knew that the instant that peril was removed, the Englishman might shoot him in the back, if he could.

Their position was bad, but it might well have been worse. The Bedouins were all seasoned desert fighters, cruel as wolves. Their chief had a blood feud with both white men, and would not fail to grasp the chance that had thrown them into his reach. But the defenders had the advantage of shelter, an inexhaustible water supply and food enough to last for months. Their only weakness was the limited amount of ammunition.

Without consulting one another, they took their stations on the ledge, Hawkston to the north of the trail head, Gordon about an equal distance to the south of it. There was no need for a conference; each man knew the other knew his business. They lay

prone, gathering broken rocks in heaps before them to add to the protection offered by the ledge rim.

Spurts of flame began to crown the ridge; bullets whined and splattered against the rock. Men crept from each end of the ridge into the clusters of boulders that littered the plain.

The men on the ledge held their fire, unmoved by the slugs that whistled near at hand. Their minds worked so similarly in a situation like this that they understood each other without the necessity of conversation. There was no chance of them wasting two cartridges on the same man. An imaginary line, running from the foot of the trail to the ridge, divided their territories. When a turbaned head was poked from a rock north of that line, it was Hawkston's rifle that knocked the man dead and sprawling over the boulder. And when a Bedouin darted from behind a spur of rock south of that line in a weaving, dodging run for cover nearer the cliff, Hawkston held his fire. Gordon's rifle cracked and the runner took the earth in a rolling tumble that ended in a brief thrashing of limbs.

A voice rose from the ridge, edged with fury.

"That's Shalan, damn him!" snarled Hawkston. "Can you make out what he says?"

"He's telling his men to keep out of sight," answered Gordon. "He tells them to be patient — they've got plenty of time."

"And that's the truth, too," grunted Hawkston. "They've got time, food, water — they'll be sneaking to the pool after dark to fill their water skins. I wish one of us could get a clean shot at Shalan. But he's too foxy to give us a chance at him. I saw him when they were charging us, standing back on the ridge, too far away to risk a bullet on him."

"If we could drop him the rest of them wouldn't hang around here a minute," commented Gordon. "They're afraid of the man-eating *djinn* they think haunts these hills."

"Well, if they could get a good look at Al Wazir now, they'd swear it was the *djinn* in person," said Hawkston. "How many cartridges

have you?”

“Both guns are full; about a dozen extra rifle cartridges.”

Hawkston swore. “I haven’t many more than that, myself. We’d better toss a coin to see which one of us sneaks out tonight, while the other keeps up a fusillade to distract their attention. The one who stays gets both rifles and all the ammunition.”

“We will like hell,” growled Gordon. “If we can’t all go, Al Wazir with us, nobody goes!”

“You’re crazy to think of a lunatic at a time like this!”

“Maybe. But if you try to sneak off I’ll drill you in the back as you run.”

Hawkston snarled wordlessly and fell silent. Both men lay motionless as red Indians, watching the ridge and the rocks that shimmered in the heat waves. The firing had ceased, but they had glimpses of white garments from time to time among the gullies and stones, as the besiegers crept about among the boulders.

Some distance to the south Gordon saw a group creeping along a shallow gully that ran to the foot of the cliff. He did not waste lead on them. When they reached the cliff at that point they would be no better off. They were too far away for effective shooting, and the cliff could be climbed only at the point where the trail wound upward. Gordon fell to studying the hill that was serving the white men as their fortress.

Some thirty caves formed the lower tier, extending across the curtain of rock that formed the face of the cliff. As he knew, each cave was connected by a narrow passage to the adjoining chamber. There were three tiers above this one, all the tiers connected by ladders of handholds niched in the rock, mounting from the lower caves through holes in the stone ceiling to the ones above. The Eagle’s Nest, in which Al Wazir was tied, safe from flying lead, was approximately in the middle of the lower tier, and the path hewn in the rock came upon the ledge directly before its opening. Hawkston

was lying in front of the third cave to the north of it, and Gordon lay before the third cave to the south.

The Arabs lay in a wide semicircle, extending from the rocks at one end of the low ridge, along its crest, and into the rocks at the other end. Only those lying among the rocks were close enough to do any damage, save by accident. And, looking up at the ledge from below, they could see only the gleaming muzzles of the white men's rifles, or catch fleeting glimpses of their heads occasionally. They seemed to be weary of wasting lead on such difficult targets. Not a shot had been fired for some time.

Gordon found himself wondering if a man on the crest of the cliff above the caves could, looking down, see him and Hawkston lying on the ledge. He studied the wall above him; it was almost sheer, but other, narrower ledges ran along each tier of caves, obstructing the view from above, as it did from the lower ledge. Remembering the craggy sides of the hill, Gordon did not believe these plains dwellers would be able to scale it at any point.

He was just contemplating returning to the Eagle's Nest to offer food and water to Al Wazir, when a faint sound reached his ears that caused him to go tense with suspicion.

It seemed to come from the caves behind him. He glanced at Hawkston. The Englishman was squinting along his rifle barrel, trying to get a bead on a *kafieh* that kept bobbing in and out among the boulders near the end of the ridge.

Gordon wriggled back from the ledge rim and rolled into the mouth of the nearest cave before he stood up, out of sight of the men below. He stood still, straining his ears.

There it was again — soft and furtive, like the rustle of cloth against stone, the shuffle of bare feet. It came from some point south of where he stood.

Gordon moved silently in that direction, passed through the adjoining chamber, entered the next — and came face to face with a tall, bearded Bedouin who yelled and whirled up a scimitar. Another

raider, a man with an evil, scarred face, was directly behind him, and three more were crawling out of a cleft in the floor.

Gordon fired from the hip, checking the downward stroke of the scimitar. The scar-faced Arab fired over the falling body and Gordon felt a numbing shock run up his arms, jerked the trigger and got no response. The bullet had smashed into the lock, ruining the mechanism. He heard Hawkston yell savagely, out on the ledge, heard the pumping fusillade of the Englishman's rifle, and a storm of shots and yells rising from the valley. They were storming the cliff! And Hawkston must meet them alone, for Gordon had his hands full!

What takes long to relate actually happened in split seconds. Before the scarred Bedouin could fire again Gordon knocked him sprawling, and reversing his rifle, crushed the skull of a man who lunged at him with a long knife. No time to draw pistol or scimitar. It was hand-to-hand slaughter with a vengeance in the narrow cave, two Bedouins tearing at him like wolves, and others jamming the shaft in their eagerness to join the fray.

No quarter given or expected — a whirlwind of furious motion, blades flashing and slashing, clanging on the rifle barrel and biting into the stock as Gordon parried — and the butt crushing home and men going down with their heads smashed. The scarred nomad had risen, but fearing to fire because of the desperate closeness of the mêlée, rushed in, clubbing his rifle, just as the last man dropped.

Gordon, bleeding from a gash across the breast muscles, ducked the swinging stock, shifted his grip on his own rifle and drove the blood-smeared butt, like a dagger, full into the bearded face. Teeth and bones crumpled and the man toppled backward into the shaft, carrying with him the men who were just clambering out.

Snatching the instant's respite Gordon sprang to the mouth of the shaft, whipping out his automatic. Wild bearded faces crowding the shaft glared up at him, frozen with the recognition of doom — then the cave reverberated deafeningly to the thundering of the big automatic, blasting those wild faces into red ruin. It was slaughter at

that range; blood and brains spattered, nerveless hands released their holds; bodies went sliding down the shaft in a red welter, jamming and choking it.

Gordon glared down it for an instant, all killer in that moment, then whirled and ran out on the ledge. Bullets sang past his head, and he saw Hawkston stuffing fresh cartridges into his rifle. No living Arab was in sight, but half a dozen new forms between the ridge and the foot of the trail told of a determined effort to storm the cliff, defeated only by the Englishman's deadly accuracy.

Hawkston shouted: "What the hell's been going on in there?"

"They've found a shaft leading up from somewhere down below," snapped Gordon. "Watch for another rush while I try to jam it."

Ignoring lead slapped at him from among the rocks, he found a sizable boulder and rolled it into the cave. He peered cautiously down the well. Handholds and footholds niched in the rock formed precarious stair steps in the slanting side. Some forty feet down the shaft made an angle, and it was there the bodies of the Arabs had jammed. But now only one corpse hung there, and as he looked it moved, as if imbued with life, and slid down out of sight. Men below the angle were pulling the bodies out, to clear the way for a fresh attack.

Gordon rolled the boulder into the shaft and it rumbled downward and wedged hard at the angle. He did not believe it could be dislodged from below, and his belief was confirmed by a muffled chorus of maledictions welling up from the depths.

Gordon was sure this shaft had not been in existence when he first came to the caves with Al Wazir, a year before. Exploring the caverns in search of the madman, the night before, it was not strange that he had failed to notice the narrow mouth in a dark corner of the cave. That it opened into some cleft at the foot of the cliff was obvious. He remembered the men he had seen stealing along the gully to the south. They had found that lower cleft, and the simultaneous attack from both sides had been well planned. But

for Gordon's keen ears it might have succeeded. As it was it had left the American with an empty pistol and a broken rifle.

Gordon dragged the bodies of the four Arabs he had killed to the ledge and heaved them over, ignoring the ferocious yells and shots that emanated from the rocks. He did not bother to marvel that he had emerged the victor from that desperate melee. He knew that fighting was half speed and strength and wit, and half blind luck. His number was not up yet; that was all.

Then he set out on a thorough tour of investigation through the lower tiers, in search of other possible shafts. Passing through the Eagle's Nest, he glanced at Al Wazir, sitting against the pillar. The man seemed to be asleep; his hairy head was sunk on his breast, his hands folded limply over the rope about his waist. Gordon set food and water beside him.

His explorations revealed no more unexpected tunnels. Gordon returned to the ledge with tins of food and a skin of water, procured from the stream which had its source in one of the caves. They ate lying flat on the shelf, for keen eyes were watching with murderous hate and eager trigger finger from ridge and rock. The sun had passed its zenith.

Their frugal meal finished, the white men lay baking in the heat like lizards on a rock, watching the ridge. The afternoon waned.

"You've got another rifle," said Hawkston.

"Mine was broken in the fight in the cave. I took this one from one of the men I killed. It has a full magazine, but no more cartridges for it. My pistol's empty."

"I've got only the cartridges in my guns," muttered Hawkston. "Looks like our number's up. They're just waiting for dark before they rush us again. One of us might get away in the dark, while the other held the fort, but since you won't agree to that, there's nothing to do but sit here and wait until they cut our throats."

"We have one chance," said Gordon. "If we can kill Shalan, the others will run. He's not afraid of man or devil, but his men fear the *djinn*. They'll be nervous as the devil after night falls."

Hawkston laughed harshly. “Fool’s talk. Shalan won’t give us a chance at him. We’ll all die here. All but Al Wazir. The Arabs won’t harm him. But they won’t help him, either. Damn him! Why did he have to go mad?”

“It wasn’t very considerate,” Gordon agreed with biting irony. “But then, you see he didn’t know you wanted to torture him into telling where he hid the Blood of the Gods.”

“It wouldn’t have been the first time a man has been tortured for them,” retorted Hawkston. “Man, you have no real idea of the value of those jewels. I saw them once, when Al Wazir was governor of Oman. The sight of them’s enough to drive a man mad. Their story sounds like a tale out of ‘The Arabian Nights.’ No one knows how many women have given up their souls or men their lives because of them, since Ala ed-din Muhammad of Delhi plundered the Hindu temple of Somnath, and found them among the loot. That was in 1294. They’ve blazed a crimson path across Asia since then. Blood’s spilled wherever they go. I’d poison any man to get them —” The wild flame that rose in the Englishman’s eyes made it easy for Gordon to believe it, and he was swept by a revulsion toward the man.

“I’m going to feed Al Wazir,” he said abruptly, rising.

No shots had come from the rocks for some time, though they knew their foes were there, waiting with their ancient, terrible patience. The sun had sunk behind the hills; the ravines and ridges were veiled in great blue shadows. Away to the east a silver-bright star winked out and quivered in the deepening blue.

Gordon strode into the square chamber — and was galvanized at the sight of the stone pillar standing empty. With a stride he reached it, bent over the frayed ends of the severed rope that told their own story. Al Wazir had found a way to free himself. Slowly, painfully, working with his clawlike finger nails through the long day, the madman had picked apart the tough strands of the heavy rope. And he was gone.

VI

Gordon stepped to the door of the nest and said curtly: “Al Wazir’s got away. I’m going to search the caves for him. Stay on the ledge and keep watch.”

“Why waste the last minutes of your life chasing a lunatic?” growled Hawkston. “It’ll be dark soon and the Arabs will be rushing us —”

“You wouldn’t understand,” snarled Gordon, turning away.

The task ahead of him was distasteful. Searching for a homicidal maniac through the darkening caves was bad enough; but the thought of having forcibly to subdue his friend again was revolting. But it must be done. Left to run at large in the caves, Al Wazir might do harm either to himself or to them. A stray bullet might strike him down.

A swift search through the lower tier proved fruitless, so Gordon mounted by the ladder into the second tier. As he climbed through the hole into the cave above he had an uncomfortable feeling that Al Wazir was crouching at the rim to break his head with a rock. But only silence and emptiness greeted him. Dusk was filling the caves so swiftly he began to despair of finding the madman. There were a hundred nooks and corners where Al Wazir could crouch unobserved; and Gordon’s time was short.

The ladder that connected the second tier with the third was in the chamber into which he had come, and glancing up through it Gordon was startled to see a circle of deepening blue set with a winking star. In an instant he was climbing toward it.

He had discovered another unsuspected exit from the caves. The ladder of handholds led through the ceiling, up the wall of the cave above, and up through a round shaft that opened in the ceiling of the highest cave. He went up, like a man climbing up a chimney, and a few moments later thrust his head over the rim.

He had come out on the summit of the cliffs. To the east the rock rim pitched up sharply, obstructing his view, but to the west he

looked out over a jagged backbone that broke in gaunt crags outlined against the twilight. He stiffened as somewhere a pebble rattled down, as if dislodged by a groping foot. Had Al Wazir come this way? Was the madman somewhere out there, climbing among those shadowy crags? If he was, he was courting death by the slip of a hand or a foot.

As he strained his eyes in the deepening shadows, a call welled up from below: “I say, Gordon! The blighters are getting ready to rush us! I see them massing among the rocks!”

With a curse Gordon started back down the shaft. It was all he could do. With darkness gathering Hawkston would not be able to hold the ledge alone.

Gordon went down swiftly, but before he reached the ledge darkness had fallen, lighted but little by the stars. The Englishman crouched on the rim, staring down into the dim gulf of shadows below.

“They’re coming!” he muttered, cocking his rifle. “Listen!”

There was no shooting, this time — only the swift purposeful *slap* of sandaled feet over the stones. In the faint starlight a shadowy mass detached itself from the outer darkness and rolled toward the foot of the cliff. Steel clinked on the rocks. The mass divided into individual figures. Men grew up out of the darkness below. No use to waste bullets on shadows. The white men held their fire. The Arabs were on the trail, and they came up with a rush, steel gleaming dully in their hands. The path was thronged with dim figures; the defenders caught the glitter of white eyeballs, rolling upward.

They began to work their rifles. The dark was cut with incessant spurts of flame. Lead thudded home. Men cried out. Bodies rolled from the trail, to strike sickeningly on the rocks below. Somewhere back in the darkness, Shalan ibn Mansour’s voice was urging on his slayers. The crafty *shaykh* had no intentions of risking his hide within reach of those grim fighters holding the ledge.

Hawkston cursed him as he worked his rifle.

“Thibhahum, bism er rassul!” sobbed the blood-lusting howl as the maddened Bedouins fought their way upward, frothing like rabid dogs in their hate and eagerness to tear the infidels limb from limb.

Gordon’s hammer fell with an empty click. He clubbed the rifle and stepped to the head of the path. A white-clad form loomed before him, fighting for a foothold on the ledge. The swinging rifle butt crushed his head like an egg-shell. A rifle fired point-blank singed Gordon’s brows and his gunstock shattered the rifleman’s shoulder.

Hawkston fired his last cartridge, hurled the empty rifle and leaped to Gordon’s side, scimitar in hand. He cut down a Bedouin who was scrambling over the rim with a knife in his teeth. The Arabs massed in a milling clump below the rim, snarling like wolves, flinching from the blows that rained down from rifle butt and scimitar.

Men began to slink back down the trail.

“Wallah!” wailed a man. “They are devils! Flee, brothers!”

“Dogs!” yelled Shalan ibn Mansour, an eery voice out of the darkness. He stood on a low knoll near the ridge, but he was invisible to the men on the cliff. “Stand to it! There are but two of them! They have ceased firing, so their guns must be empty! If you do not bring me their heads I will flay you alive! They — ahhh! *Ya allah* —” His voice rose to an incoherent scream, and then broke in a horrible gurgle.

That was followed by a tense silence, in which the Arabs clinging to the trail and massed at its foot twisted their heads over their shoulders to glare in amazement in the direction whence the cry had come. The men on the ledge, glad of the respite, shook the sweat from their eyes and stood listening with equal surprise and interest.

Someone called: *“Ohai,* Shalan ibn Mansour! Is all well with thee?”

There was no reply, and one of the Arabs left the foot of the cliff and ran toward the knoll, shouting the *shaykh's* name. The men on the ledge could trace his progress by his strident voice.

"Why did the *shaykh* cry out and fall silent?" shouted a man on the path. "What has happened, Haditha?"

Haditha's reply came back plainly.

"I have reached the knoll whereon he stood — I do not see him — *Wallah!* He is dead! He lies here slain, with his throat torn out! Allah! Help!" He screamed, fired, and then came sounds of his frantic flight. And as he ran he howled like a lost soul, for the flash of the shot had showed him a face stooping above the dead man, a wild grinning visage rendered inhuman by a matted tangle of hair — the face of a devil to the terrified Arab. And above his shrieks, as he ran, rose burst upon burst of maniacal laughter.

"Flee! Flee! I have seen it! It is the *djinn* of El Khour!"

Instant panic ensued. Men fell off the trail like ripe apples off a limb screaming: "The *djinn* has slain Shalan ibn Mansour! Flee, brothers, flee!" The night was filled with their clamor as they stampeded for the ridge, and presently the sounds of lusty whacking and the grunting of camels came back to the men on the ledge. There was no trick about this. The Ruweila, courageous in the face of human foes, but haunted by superstitious terrors, were in full flight, leaving behind them the bodies of their chief and their slain comrades.

"What the devil?" marveled Hawkston.

"It must have been Ivan," muttered Gordon. "Somehow he must have climbed down the crags on the other side of the hill — what a climb it must have been!"

They stood there listening, but the only sound that reached their ears was the diminishing noise of the horde's wild flight. Presently they descended the path, past forms grotesquely huddled where they had fallen. More bodies dotted the floor at the foot of the cliff, and Gordon picked up a rifle dropped from a dead hand, and assured himself that it was loaded. With the Arabs in flight, the

truce between him and Hawkston might well be at an end. Their future relations would depend entirely upon the Englishman.

A few moments later they stood upon the low knoll on which Shalan ibn Mansour had stood. The Arab chief was still there. He sprawled on his back in a dark crimson puddle, and his throat had been ripped open as if by the claws of a wild beast. He was a grisly sight in the light of the match Gordon shaded over him.

The American straightened, blew out the match and flipped it away. He strained his eyes into the surrounding shadows and called: "Ivan!" There was no answer.

"Do you suppose it was really Al Wazir who killed him?" asked Hawkston uneasily.

"Who else could it have been? He must have sneaked on Shalan from behind. The other fellow caught a glimpse of him, and thought he was the devil of the caves, just as you said they would."

What erratic whim had impelled Al Wazir to this deed, Gordon could not say. Who can guess the vagaries of the insane? The primitive instincts of murder loosed by lunacy — a madman stealing through the night, attracted by a solitary figure shouting from a knoll — it was not so strange, after all.

"Well, let's start looking for him," growled Hawkston. "I know you won't start back to the coast until we've got him nicely tied up on that camel. So the sooner the better."

"All right." Gordon's voice betrayed none of the suspicion in his mind. He knew that Hawkston's nature and purposes had been altered none by what they had passed through. The man was treacherous and unpredictable as a wolf. He turned and started toward the cliff, but he took good care not to let the Englishman get behind him, and he carried his cocked rifle ready.

"I want to find the lower end of that shaft the Arabs came up," said Gordon. "Ivan may be hiding there. It must be near the western end of that gully they were sneaking along when I first saw them."

They were moving along the shallow gully, and where it ended, against the foot of the cliff, they saw a narrow slitlike cleft in the stone, large enough to admit a man. Hoarding their matches carefully they entered and moved along the narrow tunnel into which it opened.

This tunnel led straight back into the cliff for a short distance, then turned sharply to the right, running along until it ended in a small chamber cut out of solid stone, which Gordon believed was directly under the room in which he had fought the Arabs. His belief was confirmed when they found the opening of the shaft leading upward. A match held up in the well showed the angle still blocked by the boulder.

"Well, we know how they got into the caves," growled Hawkston. "But we haven't found Al Wazir. He's not in here."

"We'll go up into the caves," answered Gordon. "He'll come back there for food. We'll catch him then."

"And then what?" demanded Hawkston.

"It's obvious, isn't it? We hit out for the caravan road. Ivan rides. We walk. We can make it, all right. I don't believe the Ruweila will stop before they get back to the tents of their tribe. I'm hoping Ivan's mind can be restored when we get him back to civilization."

"And what about the Blood of the Gods?"

"Well, what about them? They're his, to do what he pleases with them, aren't they?"

Hawkston did not reply, nor did he seem aware of Gordon's suspicion of him. He had no rifle, but Gordon knew the pistol at his hip was loaded. The American carried his rifle in the crook of his arm, and he maneuvered so the Englishman went ahead of him as they groped their way back down the tunnel and out into the starlight. Just what Hawkston's intentions were, he did not know. Sooner or later, he believed, he would have to fight the Englishman for his life. But somehow he felt that this would not be necessary until after Al Wazir had been found and secured.

He wondered about the tunnel and the shaft to the top of the cliff. They had not been there a year ago. Obviously the Arabs had found the tunnel purely by accident.

“No use searching the caves tonight,” said Hawkston, when they had reached the ledge. “We’ll take turns watching and sleeping. Take the first watch, will you? I didn’t sleep last night, you know.”

Gordon nodded. Hawkston dragged the sleeping skins from the nest and wrapping himself in them, fell asleep close to the wall. Gordon sat down a short distance away, his rifle across his knees. As he sat he dozed lightly, waking each time the sleeping Englishman stirred.

He was still sitting there when the dawn reddened the eastern sky. Hawkston rose, stretched and yawned. “Why didn’t you wake me to watch my turn?” he asked.

“You know damned well why I didn’t,” grated Gordon. “I don’t care to run the risk of being murdered in my sleep.”

“You don’t like me, do you, Gordon?” Hawkston laughed. But only his lips smiled, and a red flame smoldered in his eyes. “Well, that makes the feeling mutual, you know. After we’ve got Al Wazir back to el-Azem, I’m looking forward to a gentlemanly settling of our differences — just you and I — and a pair of swords.”

“Why wait until then?” Gordon was on his feet, his nostrils quivering with the eagerness of hard-leashed hate.

Hawkston shook his head, smiling fiercely. “Oh no, El Borak. No fighting until we get out of the desert.”

“All right,” snarled the American, disgruntledly. “Let’s eat, and then start combing the caves for Ivan.”

A slight sound brought them both wheeling toward the door of the nest. Al Wazir stood there, plucking at his beard with his long black nails. His eyes lacked their former wild-beast glare; they were clouded, plaintive. His attitude was one of bewilderment rather than menace.

“Ivan!” muttered Gordon, setting down his rifle and moving toward the wild man. Al Wazir did not retreat, nor did he make any hostile demonstration. He stood stolidly, uneasily tugging at his tangled beard. “He’s in a milder mood,” murmured Gordon. “Easy, Hawkston. Let me handle this. I don’t believe he’ll have to be overpowered this time.”

“In that case,” said Hawkston, “I don’t need you any longer.”

Gordon whipped around; the Englishman’s eyes were red with the killing lust, and his hand rested on the butt of his pistol. For an instant the two men stood tensely, facing each other. Hawkston spoke, almost in a whisper:

“You fool, did you think I’d give you an even break? I don’t need you to help me get Al Wazir back to el-Azem. I know a German doctor who can restore his mind if anybody can — and then I’ll see that he tells me where to find the Blood of the Gods —”

Their right hands moved in a simultaneous blur of speed. Hawkston’s gun cleared its holster as Gordon’s scimitar flashed free. And the gun spoke just as the blade struck it, knocking it from the Englishman’s hand. Gordon felt the wind of the slug and behind him the madman in the door grunted and fell heavily. The pistol rang on the stone and bounced from the ledge, and Gordon cut murderously at Hawkston’s head, his eyes red with fury. A swift backward leap carried the Englishman out of range, and Hawkston tore out his scimitar as Gordon came at him in savage silence. The American had seen Al Wazir lying limp in the doorway, blood oozing from his head.

Gordon and Hawkston came together with a dazzling flame and crack of steel, in an unleashing of hard-pent passions, two wild natures, thirsty for each others’ life. Here was the urge to kill, loosed at last, and backing every blow.

For a few minutes stroke followed stroke too fast for the eye to distinguish, had any eye witnessed that onslaught. They fought with a chilled-steel fury, a reckless abandon that was yet neither wild nor careless. The clang of steel was deafening; miraculously, it seemed, the shimmer of steel played about their heads, yet neither edge cut home. The skill of the two fighters was too well matched.

After the first hurricane of attack, the play changed subtly; it grew, not less savage but more crafty. The desert sun, that had lighted the blades of a thousand generations of swordsmen, in a

land sworn to the sword, had never shone on a more scintillating display of swordsmanship than this, where two aliens carved out the destinies of their tangled careers on a high-flung ledge between sun and desert.

Up and down the ledge — scruff and shift of quick-moving feet — gliding, not stamping — ring and clash of steel meeting steel — flame-lighted black eyes glaring into flinty gray eyes; flying blades turned crimson by the rising sun.

Hawkston had cut his teeth on the straight blade of his native land, and he was partial to the point and used it with devilish skill. Gordon had learned sword fighting in the hard school of the Afghan mountain wars, with the curved tulwar, and he fought with no set or orthodox style. His blade was a lethal, living thing that darted like a serpent's tongue or lashed with devastating power.

Here was no ceremonious dueling with elegant rules and formalities. It was a fight for life, naked and desperate, and within the space of half a dozen minutes both men had attempted or foiled tricks that would have made a medieval Italian fencing master blink. There was no pause or breathing spell; only the constant slither and rasp of blade on blade — Hawkston failing in his attempt to maneuver Gordon about so the sun would dazzle his eyes; Gordon almost rushing Hawkston over the rim of the ledge, the Englishman saving himself by a sidewise leap.

The end came suddenly. Hawkston, with sweat pouring down his face, realized that the sheer strength in Gordon's arm was beginning to tell. Even his iron wrist was growing numb under the terrific blows the American rained on his guard. Believing himself to be superior to Gordon in pure fencing skill, he began the preliminaries of an intricate maneuver, and, meeting with apparent success, feinted a cut at Gordon's head.

El Borak knew it was a feint, but pretending to be deceived by it, he lifted his sword as though to parry the cut. Instantly Hawkston's point licked at his throat. Even as the Englishman thrust he knew he had been tricked, but he could not check the motion.

The blade passed over Gordon's shoulder as the American evaded the thrust with a swaying twist of his torso, and his scimitar flashed like white-steel lightning in the sun. Hawkston's dark features were blotted out by a gush of blood; his scimitar rang loud on the rocky ledge; he swayed, tottered, and fell suddenly.

Gordon shook the sweat from his eyes and glared down at the prostrate figure, too drunk with hate and battle to fully realize that his foe was dead. He started and whirled as a voice spoke weakly behind him: "The same swift blade as ever, El Borak!"

Al Wazir was sitting with his back against the wall. His eyes, no longer murky nor bloodshot, met Gordon's levelly. In spite of his tangled hair and beard there was something ineffably tranquil and seerlike about him. Here, indeed, was the man Gordon had known of old.

"Ivan! Alive! But Hawkston's bullet —"

"Was that what it was?" Al Wazir lifted a hand to his head; it came away smeared with blood. "Anyway, I'm very much alive, and my mind's clear — for the first time in Heaven knows how long. What happened?"

"You stopped a slug meant for me," grunted Gordon. "Let me see that wound."

After a brief investigation he announced: "Just a graze; ploughed through the scalp and knocked you out. I'll wash it and bandage it." While he worked he said tersely: "Hawkston was on your trail; after your rubies. I tried to beat him here, and Shalan ibn Mansour trapped us both. You were a bit out of your head and I had to tie you up. We had a tussle with the Arabs and finally beat them off."

"What day is it?" asked Al Wazir. At Gordon's reply he ejaculated: "Great heavens! It's more than a month since I got knocked on the head!"

"What's that?" exclaimed Gordon. "I thought the loneliness —"

Al Wazir laughed. “Not that, El Borak. I was doing some excavation work. I discovered a shaft in one of the lower caves, leading down to the tunnel. The mouths of both were sealed with slabs of rock. I opened them up, just out of curiosity. Then I found another shaft leading from an upper cave to the summit of the cliff, like a chimney. It was while I was working out the slab that sealed it that I dislodged a shower of rocks. One of them gave me an awful rap on the head. My mind’s been a blank ever since, except for brief intervals — and they weren’t very clear. I remember them like bits of dreams now. I remember squatting in the nest, tearing tins open and gobbling food, trying to remember who I was and why I was here. Then everything would fade out again.

“I have another vague recollection of being tied to a rock in the cave, and seeing you and Hawkston lying on the ledge, firing. Of course I didn’t know either of you. I remember hearing you say that if somebody was killed the others would go away. There was a lot of shooting and shouting and that frightened me and hurt my ears. I wanted you all to go away and leave me in peace.

“I don’t know how I got loose, but my next disjointed bit of memory is that of creeping up the shaft that leads to the top of the cliff, and then climbing, climbing, with the stars over me and the wind blowing in my face — heavens! I must have climbed over the summit of the hill and down the crags on the other side!

“Then I have a muddled remembrance of running and crawling through the dark — a confused impression of shooting and noise, and a man standing alone on a knoll shouting —” He shuddered and shook his head. “When I try to remember what happened then, it’s all a blind whirl of fire and blood, like a nightmare. Somehow I seemed to feel that the man on the knoll was to blame for all the noise that was maddening me, and that if he quit shouting, they’d all go away and let me alone. But from that point it’s all a blind red mist.”

Gordon held his peace. He realized that it was his remark, overheard by Al Wazir, that if Shalan ibn Mansour were slain the Arabs would flee, which had taken root in the madman’s clouded

brain and provided the impulse — probably subconsciously — which finally translated itself into action. Al Wazir did not remember having killed the *shaykh,* and there was no use distressing him with the truth.

"I remember running, then," murmured Al Wazir, rubbing his head. "I was in a terrible fright, and trying to get back to the caves. I remember climbing again — up, this time. I must have climbed back over the crags and down the chimney again — I'll wager I couldn't make that climb clothed in my right mind. The next thing I remember is hearing voices, and they sounded somehow familiar. I started toward them — then something cracked and flashed in my head, and I knew nothing more until I came to myself a few minutes ago, in possession of all my faculties, and saw you and Hawkston fighting with your swords."

"You were evidently regaining your senses," said Gordon. "It took the extra jolt of that slug to set your numb machinery going again. Such things have happened before.

"Ivan, I've got a camel hidden near by, and the Arabs left some ropes of hay in their camp when they pulled out. I'm going to feed and water it, and then — well, I intended taking you back to the coast with me, but since you've regained your wits, I suppose you'll want —"

"I'm going back with you," said Al Wazir. "My meditations didn't give me the gift of prophecy, but they convinced me — even before I got that rap on the head — that the best life a man can live is one of service to his fellow men. Just as you do, in your own way! I can't help mankind by dreaming out here in the desert."

He glanced down at the prostrate figure on the ledge. "We'll have to build a cairn, first. Poor devil; it was his destiny to be the last sacrifice to the Blood of the Gods."

"What do you mean?"

"They were stained with men's blood," answered Al Wazir. "They have caused nothing but suffering and crime since they first appeared in history. Before I left el-Azem I threw them into the sea."

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Sons of the Hawk

I
A Cry Out of the East

A cry from beyond the bolted door — a thick, desperate croaking that gaspingly repeated a name. Stuart Brent paused in the act of filling a whisky glass, and shot a startled glance toward the door from beyond which that cry had come. It was his name that had been gasped out — and why should anyone call on him with such frantic urgency at midnight in the hall outside his apartment?

He stepped to the door, without stopping to set down the square amber bottle. Even as he turned the knob, he was electrified by the unmistakable sounds of a struggle outside — the quick fierce scuff of feet, the thud of blows, then the desperate voice lifted again. He threw the door open.

The richly appointed hallway outside was dimly lighted by bulbs concealed in the jaws of gilt dragons writhing across the ceiling. The costly red rugs and velvet tapestries seemed to drink in this soft

light, heightening an effect of unreality. But the struggle going on before his eyes was as real as life and death.

There were splashes of a brighter crimson on the dark-red rug. A man was down on his back before the door, a slender man whose white face shone like a wax mask in the dim light. Another man crouched upon him, one knee grinding brutally into his breast, one hand twisting at the victim's throat. The other hand lifted a red-smeared blade.

Brent acted entirely through impulse. Everything happened simultaneously. The knife was swinging up for the downward drive even as he opened the door. At the height of its arc it hovered briefly as the wielder shot a venomous, slit-eyed glance at the man in the doorway. In that instant Brent saw murder about to be done, saw that the victim was a white man, the killer a swarthy alien of some kind. Age-old implanted instincts acted through him, without his conscious volition. He dashed the heavy whisky bottle full into the dark face with all his power. The hard, stocky body toppled backward in a crash of broken glass and a shower of splattering liquor, and the knife rang on the floor several feet away. With a feline snarl the fellow bounced to his feet, red-eyed, blood and whisky streaming from his face and over his collar.

For an instant he crouched as if to leap at Brent barehanded. Then the glare in his eyes wavered, turned to something like fear, and he wheeled and was gone, lunging down the stair with reckless haste. Brent stared after him in amazement. The whole affair was fantastic, and Brent was irritated. He had broken a self-imposed rule of long standing — which was never to butt into anything which was not his business.

"Brent!" It was the wounded man, calling him weakly.

Brent bent down to him.

"What is it, old fellow — Thunderation! Stockton!"

"Get me in, quick!" panted the other, staring fearfully at the stair. "He may come back — with others."

Brent stooped and lifted him bodily. Stockton was not a bulky man, and Brent's trim frame concealed the muscles of an athlete. There was no sound throughout the building. Evidently no one had been aroused by the muffled sounds of the brief fight. Brent carried the wounded man into the room and laid him carefully on a divan. There was blood on Brent's hands when he straightened.

"Lock the door!" gasped Stockton.

Brent obeyed, and then turned back, frowning concernedly down at the man. They offered a striking contrast — Stockton, light-haired, of medium height, frail, with plain, commonplace features now twisted in a grimace of pain, his sober garments disheveled and smeared with blood; Brent, tall, dark, immaculately tailored, handsome in a virile masculine way, and self-assured. But in Stockton's pale eyes there blazed a fire that burned away the difference between them, and gave the wounded man something that Brent did not possess — something that dominated the scene.

"You're hurt, Dick!" Brent caught up a fresh whisky bottle. "Why, man, you're stabbed to pieces! I'll call a doctor, and —"

"No!" A lean hand brushed aside the whisky glass and seized Brent's wrist. "It's no use. I'm bleeding inside. I'd be dead now, but I can't leave my job unfinished. Don't interrupt — just listen!"

Brent knew Stockton spoke the truth. Blood was oozing thinly from the wounds in his breast, where a thin-bladed knife must have struck home at least half a dozen times. Brent looked on, awed and appalled, as the small, bright-eyed man fought death to a standstill, gripping the last fading fringes of life and keeping himself conscious and lucid to the end by the sheer effort of an iron will.

"I stumbled on something big tonight, down in a water-front dive. I was looking for something else — uncovered this by accident. Then *they* got suspicious. I got away — came here because you were the only man I knew in San Francisco. But that devil was after me — caught me on the stair."

Blood oozed from the livid lips, and Stockton spat dryly. Brent looked on helplessly. He knew the man was a secret agent of the

British government, who had made a business of tracing sinister secrets to their source. He was dying as he had lived, in the harness.

“Something big!” whispered the Englishman. “Something that balances the fate of India! I can’t tell you all now — I’m going fast. But there’s one man in the world who must know. You must find him, Brent! His name is Gordon — Francis Xavier Gordon. He’s an American; the Afghans call him El Borak. I’d have gone to him — but you must go. Promise me!”

Brent did not hesitate. His soothing hand on the dying man’s shoulder was even more convincing and reassuring than his quiet, level voice.

“I promise, old man. But where am I to find him?”

“Somewhere in Afghanistan. Go at once. Tell the police nothing. Spies are all around. If they know I knew you, and spoke with you before I died, they’ll kill you before you can reach Gordon. Tell the police I was simply a drunken stranger, wounded by an unknown party, and staggered into your hall to die. You never saw me before. I said nothing before I died.

“Go to Kabul. The British officials will make your way easy that far. Simply say to each one: ‘Remember the kites of Khoral Nulla.’ That’s your password. If Gordon isn’t in Kabul, the ameer will give you an escort to hunt for him in the hills. You must find him! The peace of India depends on him, now!”

“But what shall I tell him?” Brent was bewildered.

“Say to him,” gasped the dying man, fighting fiercely for a few more moments of life, “say: ‘The Black Tigers have a new prince; they call him Abd el Khafid, but his real name is Vladimir Jakrovitch.’”

“Is that all?” This affair was growing more and more bizarre.

“Gordon will understand and act. The Black Tigers are your peril. They’re a secret society of Asiatic murderers. Therefore, be on your guard at every step of the way. But El Borak will understand. He’ll

know where to look for Jakrovitch — in Rub el Harami — the Abode of Thieves —"

A convulsive shudder, and the slim thread that had held the life in the tortured body snapped.

Brent straightened and looked down at the dead man in wonder. He shook his head, marveling again at the inner unrest that sent men wandering in the waste places of the world, playing a game of life and death for a meager wage. Games that had gold for their stake Brent could understand — none better. His strong, sure fingers could read the cards almost as a man reads books; but he could not read the souls of men like Richard Stockton who stake their lives on the bare boards where Death is the dealer. What if the man won, how could he measure his winnings, where cash his chips? Brent asked no odds of life; he lost without a wince; but in winning, he was a usurer, demanding the last least crumb of the wager, and content with nothing less than the glittering, solid materialities of life. The grim and barren game Stockton had played held no promise for Stuart Brent, and to him the Englishman had always been a little mad.

But whatever Brent's faults or virtues, he had his code. He lived by it, and by it he meant to die. The foundation stone of that code was loyalty. Stockton had never saved Brent's life, renounced a girl both loved, exonerated him from a false accusation, or anything so dramatic. They had simply been boyhood friends in a certain British university, years ago, and years had passed between their occasional meetings since then. Stockton had no claim on Brent, except for their old friendship. But that was a tie as solid as a log chain, and the Englishman had known it, when, in the desperation of knowing himself doomed, he had crawled to Brent's door. And Brent had given his promise, and he intended making it good. It did not occur to him that there was any other alternative. Stuart Brent was the restless black sheep of an aristocratic old California family whose

founder crossed the plains in an ox wagon in ’49 — and he had never welshed a bet nor let down a friend.

He turned his head and stared through a window, almost hidden by its satin curtains. He was comfortable here. His luck had been phenomenal of late. Tomorrow evening there was a big poker game scheduled at his favorite club, with a fat Oklahoma oil king who was ripe for a cleaning. The races began at Tia Juana within a few days, and Brent had his eye on a slim sorrel gelding that ran like the flame of a prairie fire.

Outside, the fog curled and drifted, beading the pane. Pictures formed for him there — prophetic pictures of an East different from the colorful civilized East he had touched in his roamings. Pictures not at all like the European-dominated cities he remembered, exotic colors of veranda-shaded clubs, soft-footed servants laden with cooling drinks, languorous and beautiful women, white garments and sun helmets. Shiveringly he sensed a wilder, older East; it had blown a scent of itself to him out of the fog, over a knife stained with human blood. An East not soft and warm and exotic-colored, but bleak and grim and savage, where peace was not and law was a mockery, and life hung on the tilt of a balanced blade. The East known by Stockton, and this mysterious American they called “El Borak.”

Brent’s world was here, the world he had promised to abandon for a blind, quixotic mission; he knew nothing of that other leaner, fiercer world; but there was no hesitation in his manner as he turned toward the door.

II
The Road to Rub el Harami

A wind blew over the shoulders of the peaks where the snow lay drifted, a knife-edge wind that slashed through leather and wadded cloth in spite of the searing sun. Stuart Brent blinked his eyes against the glare of that intolerable sun, shivered at the bite of the wind. He had no coat, and his shirt was tattered. For the thousandth

futile, involuntary time, he wrenched at the fetters on his wrists. They jangled, and the man riding in front of him cursed, turned and struck him heavily in the mouth. Brent reeled in his saddle, blood starting to his lips.

The saddle chafed him, and the stirrups were too short for his long legs. He was riding along a knife-edge trail, in the middle of a straggling line of some thirty men — ragged men on gaunt, ribby horses. They rode hunched in their high-peaked saddles, turbaned heads thrust forward and nodding in unison to the *clop-clop* of their horses' hoofs, long-barreled rifles swaying across the saddlebows. On one hand rose a towering cliff; on the other, a sheer precipice fell away into echoing depths. The skin was worn from Brent's wrists by the rusty, clumsy iron manacles that secured them; he was bruised from kicks and blows, faint with hunger and giddy with the enormousness of the altitude. His nose bled at times without having been struck. Ahead of them loomed the backbone of the gigantic range that had risen like a rampart before them for so many days.

Dizzily he reviewed the events of the weeks that stretched between the time he had carried Dick Stockton, dying, into his flat, and this unbelievable, yet painfully real moment. The intervening period of time might have been an unfathomable and unbridgeable gulf stretching between and dividing two worlds that had nothing in common save consciousness.

He had come to India on the first ship he could catch. Official doors had opened to him at the whispered password: "Remember the kites of Khoral Nulla!" His path had been smoothed by impressive-looking documents with great red seals, by cryptic orders barked over telephones, or whispered into attentive ears. He had moved smoothly northward along hitherto unguessed channels. He had glimpsed, faintly, some of the shadowy, mountainous machinery grinding silently and ceaselessly behind the scenes — the unseen, half-suspected cogwheels of the empire that girdles the world.

Mustached men with medals on their breasts had conferred with him as to his needs, and quiet men in civilian clothes had guided

him on his way. But no one had asked him why he sought El Borak, or what message he bore. The password and the mention of Stockton had sufficed. His friend had been more important in the imperial scheme of things than Brent had ever realized. The adventure had seemed more and more fantastic as he progressed — a page out of the "Arabian Nights," as he blindly carried a dead man's message, the significance of which he could not even guess, to a mysterious figure lost in the mists of the hills; while, at a whispered incantation, hidden doors swung wide and enigmatic figures bowed him on his way. But all this changed in the North.

Gordon was not in Kabul. This Brent learned from the lips of no less than the ameer himself — wearing his European garments as if born to them, but with the sharp, restless eyes of a man who knows he is a pawn between powerful rivals, and whose nerves are worn thin by the constant struggle for survival. Brent sensed that Gordon was a staff on which the ameer leaned heavily. But neither king nor agents of empire could chain the American's roving foot, or direct the hawk flights of the man the Afghans called "El Borak," the "Swift."

And Gordon was gone — wandering alone into those naked hills whose bleak mysteries had long ago claimed him from his own kind. He might be gone a month, he might be gone a year. He might — and the ameer shifted uneasily at the possibility — never return. The crag-set villages were full of his blood enemies.

Not even the long arm of empire reached beyond Kabul. The ameer ruled the tribes after a fashion — with a dominance that dared not presume too far. This was the Country of the Hills, where law was hinged on the strong arm wielding the long knife.

Gordon had vanished into the Northwest. And Brent, though flinching at the grim nakedness of the Himalayas, did not hesitate or visualize an alternative. He asked for and received an escort of soldiers. With them he pushed on, trying to follow Gordon's trail through the mountain villages.

A week out of Kabul they lost all trace of him. To all effects Gordon had vanished into thin air. The wild, shaggy hillmen answered questions sullenly, or not at all, glaring at the nervous Kabuli soldiery from under black brows. The farther they got away from Kabul, the more open the hostility. Only once did a question evoke a spontaneous response, and that was a suggestion that Gordon had been murdered by hostile tribesmen. At that, sardonic laughter yelled up from the wild men — the fierce, mocking mirth of the hills. El Borak trapped by his enemies? Is the gray wolf devoured by the fat-tailed sheep? And another gust of dry, ironic laughter, as hard as the black crags that burned under a sun of liquid flame.

Stubborn as his grandsire who had glimpsed a mirage of tree-fringed ocean shore across the scorching desolation of another desert, Brent groped on, at a blind venture, trying to pick up the cold scent, far past the point of safety, as the gray-faced soldiers warned him again and again. They warned him that they were far from Kabul, in a sparsely settled, rebellious, little-explored region, whose wild people were rebels to the ameer, and enemies to El Borak. They would have deserted Brent long before and fled back to Kabul, had they not feared the ameer's wrath.

Their forebodings were justified in the hurricane of rifle fire that swept their camp in a chill gray dawn. Most of them fell at the first volley that ripped from the rocks about them. The rest fought futilely, ridden over and cut down by the wild riders that materialized out of the gray. Brent knew the surprise had been the soldiers' fault, but he did not have it in his heart to curse them, even now. They had been like children, sneaking in out of the cold as soon as his back was turned, sleeping on sentry duty, and lapsing into slovenly and unmilitary habits as soon as they were out of sight of Kabul. They had not wanted to come, in the first place; a foreboding of doom had haunted them; and now they were dead, and he was a captive, riding toward a fate he could not even guess.

Four days had passed since that slaughter, but he still turned sick when he remembered it — the smell of powder and blood, the

screams, the rending chop of steel. He shuddered at the memory of the man he had killed in that last rush, with his pistol muzzle almost in the bearded face that lunged at him beneath a lifted rifle butt. He had never killed a man before. He sickened as he remembered the cries of the wounded soldiers when the conquerors cut their throats. And over and over he wondered why he had been spared — why they had overpowered and fettered him, instead of killing him. His suffering had been so intense he often wished they had killed him outright.

He was allowed to ride, and he was fed grudgingly when the others ate. But the food was niggardly. He who had never known hunger was never without it now, a gnawing misery. His coat had been taken from him, and the nights were a long agony in which he almost froze on the hard ground, in the icy winds. He wearied unto death of the day-long riding over incredible trails that wound up and up until he felt as if he could reach out a hand — if his hands were free — and touch the cold, pale sky. He was kicked and beaten until the first fiery resentment and humiliation had been dissolved in a dull hurt that was only aware of the physical pain, not of the injury to his self-respect.

He did not know who his captors were. They did not deign to speak English to him, but he had picked up more than a smattering of Pashto on that long journey up the Khyber to Kabul, and from Kabul westward. Like many men who live by their wits, he had the knack of acquiring new languages. But all he learned from listening to their conversation was that their leader was called Muhammad ez Zahir, and their destiny was Rub el Harami.

Rub el Harami! Brent had heard it first as a meaningless phrase gasped from Richard Stockton’s blue lips. He had heard more of it as he came northward from the hot plains of the Punjab — a city of mystery and evil, which no white man had ever visited except as a captive, and from which none had ever escaped. A plague spot,

sprawled in the high, bare hills, almost fabulous, beyond the reach of the ameer — an outlaw city, whence the winds blew whispered tales too fantastic and hideous for credence, even in this Country of the Knife.

At times Brent's escort mocked him, their burning eyes and grimly smiling lips lending a sinister meaning to their taunt: "The Feringi goes to Rub el Harami!"

For the pride of race he stiffened his spine and set his jaw; he plumbed unsuspected depths of endurance — legacy of a clean, athletic life, sharpened by the hard traveling of the past weeks.

They crossed a rocky crest and dropped down an incline between ridges that tilted up for a thousand feet. Far above and beyond them they occasionally glimpsed a notch in the rampart that was the pass over which they must cross the backbone of the range up which they were toiling. It was as they labored up a long slope that the solitary horseman appeared.

The sun was poised on the knife-edge crest of a ridge to the west, a blood-colored ball, turning a streak of the sky to flame. Against that crimson ball a horseman appeared suddenly, a centaur image, black against the blinding curtain. Below him every rider turned in his saddle, and rifle bolts clicked. It did not need the barked command of Muhammad ez Zahir to halt the troop. There was something wild and arresting about that untamed figure in the sunset that held every eye. The rider's head was thrown back, the horse's long mane streaming in the wind.

Then the black silhouette detached itself from the crimson ball and moved down toward them, details springing into being as it emerged from the blinding background. It was a man on a rangy black stallion who came down the rocky, pathless slope with the smooth curving flight of an eagle, the sure hoofs spurning the ground. Brent, himself a horseman, felt his heart leap into his throat with admiration for the savage steed.

But he almost forgot the horse when the rider pulled up before them. He was neither tall nor bulky, but a barbaric strength was

evident in his compact shoulders, his deep chest, his corded wrists. There was strength, too, in the keen, dark face, and the eyes, the blackest Brent had ever seen, gleamed with an inward fire such as the American had seen burn in the eyes of wild things — an indomitable wildness and an unquenchable vitality. The thin, black mustache did not hide the hard set of the mouth.

The stranger looked like a desert dandy beside the ragged men of the troop, but it was a dandyism definitely masculine, from the silken turban to the silver-heeled boots. His bright-hued robe was belted with a gold-buckled girdle that supported a Turkish saber and a long dagger. A rifle jutted its butt from a scabbard beneath his knee.

Thirty-odd pairs of hostile eyes centered on him, after suspiciously sweeping the empty ridges behind him as he galloped up before the troop and reined his steed back on its haunches with a flourish that set the gold ornaments jingling on curb chains and reins. An empty hand was flung up in an exaggerated gesture of peace. The rider, well poised and confident, carried himself with a definite swagger.

“What do you want?” growled Muhammad ez Zahir, his cocked rifle covering the stranger.

“A small thing, as Allah is my witness!” declared the other, speaking Pashto with an accent Brent had never heard before. “I am Shirkuh, of Jebel Jawur. I ride to Rub el Harami. I wish to accompany you.”

“Are you alone?” demanded Muhammad.

“I set forth from Herat many days ago with a party of camel men who swore they would guide me to Rub el Harami. Last night they sought to slay and rob me. One of them died suddenly. The others ran away, leaving me without food or guides. I lost my way, and have been wandering in the mountains all last night and all this day. Just now, by the favor of Allah, I sighted your band.”

“How do you know we are bound for Rub el Harami?” demanded Muhammad.

“Are you not Muhammad ez Zahir, the prince of swordsmen?” countered Shirkuh.

The Afghan’s beard bristled with satisfaction. He was not impervious to flattery. But he was still suspicious.

“You know me, Kurd?”

“Who does not know Muhammad ez Zahir? I saw you in the *suk* of Teheran, years ago. And now men say you are high in the ranks of the Black Tigers.”

“Beware how your tongue runs, Kurd!” responded Muhammad. “Words are sometimes blades to cut men’s throats. Are you sure of a welcome in Rub el Harami?”

“What stranger can be sure of a welcome there?” Shirkuh laughed. “But there is Feringi blood on my sword, and a price on my head. I have heard that such men were welcome in Rub el Harami.”

“Ride with us if you will,” said Muhammad. “I will get you through the Pass of Nadir Khan. But what may await you at the city gates is none of my affair. I have not invited you to Rub el Harami. I accept no responsibility for you.”

“I ask for no man to vouch for me,” retorted Shirkuh, with a glint of anger, brief and sharp, like the flash of hidden steel struck by a flint and momentarily revealed. He glanced curiously at Brent.

“Has there been a raid over the border?” he asked.

“This fool came seeking someone,” scornfully answered Muhammad. “He walked into a trap set for him.”

“What will be done with him in Rub el Harami?” pursued the newcomer, and Brent’s interest in the conversation suddenly became painfully intense.

“He will be placed on the slave block,” answered Muhammad, “according to the age-old custom of the city. Who bids highest will have him.”

And so Brent learned the fate in store for him, and cold sweat broke out on his flesh as he contemplated a life spent as a tortured drudge to some turbaned ruffian. But he held up his head, feeling Shirkuh's fierce eyes upon him.

The stranger said slowly: "It may be his destiny to serve Shirkuh, of the Jebel Jawur! I never owned a slave — but who knows? It strikes my fancy to buy this Feringi!"

Brent reflected that Shirkuh must know that he was in no danger of being murdered and robbed, or he would never so openly imply possession of money. That suggested that he knew these were picked men, carrying out someone's instructions so implicitly that they could be depended on not to commit any crime not included in those orders. That implied organization and obedience beyond the conception of any ordinary hill chief. He was convinced that these men belonged to that mysterious cult against which Stockton had warned him — the Black Tigers. Then had their capture of him been due merely to chance? It seemed improbable.

"There are rich men in Rub el Harami, Kurd," growled Muhammad. "But it may be that none will want this Feringi and a wandering vagabond like you might buy him. Who knows?"

"Only in Allah is knowledge," agreed Shirkuh, and swung his horse into line behind Brent, crowding a man out of position and laughing when the Afghan snarled at him.

The troop got into motion, and a man leaned over to strike Brent with a rifle butt. Shirkuh checked the stroke. His lips laughed, but there was menace in his eyes.

"Nay! This infidel may belong to me before many days, and I will not have his bones broken!"

The man growled, but did not press the matter, and the troop rode on. They toiled up a ridge in a long shadow cast by the crag behind which the sun had sunk, and came into a valley and the sight of the sun again, just sinking behind a mountain. As they went

down the slope, they spied white turbans moving among the crags to the west, and Muhammad ez Zahir snarled in suspicion at Shirkuh.

“Are they friends of yours, you dog? You said you were alone!”

“I know them not!” declared Shirkuh. Then he dragged his rifle from its boot. “The dogs fire on us!” For a tiny tongue of fire had jetted from among the boulders in the distance, and a bullet whined overhead.

“Hill-bred dogs who grudge us the use of the well ahead!” said Muhammad ez Zahir. “Would we had time to teach them a lesson! Hold your fire, you dogs! The range is too long for either they or us to do damage.”

But Shirkuh wheeled out of the line of march and rode toward the foot of the ridge. Half a dozen men broke cover, high up on the slope, and dashed away over the crest, leaning low and spurring hard. Shirkuh fired once, then took steadier aim and fired three shots in swift succession.

“You missed!” shouted Muhammad angrily. “Who could hit at such a range?”

“Nay!” yelled Shirkuh. “Look!”

One of the ragged white shapes had wavered and pitched forward on its pony’s neck. The beast vanished over the ridge, its rider lolling limply in the saddle.

“He will not ride far!” exulted Shirkuh, waving his rifle over his head as he raced back to the troop. “We Kurds have eyes like mountain hawks!”

“Shooting a Pathan hill thief does not make a hero,” snapped Muhammad, turning disgustedly away.

But Shirkuh merely laughed tolerantly, as one so sure of his fame that he could afford to overlook the jealousies of lesser souls.

They rode on down into the broad valley, seeing no more of the hill-men. Dusk was falling when they halted beside the well. Brent, too stiff to dismount, was roughly jerked off his horse. His legs were

bound, and he was allowed to sit with his back against a boulder just far enough away from the fires they built to keep him from benefiting any from the heat. No guard was set over him at present.

Presently Shirkuh came striding over to where the prisoner gnawed at the wretched crusts they allowed him. Shirkuh walked with a horseman's roll, setting his booted legs wide. He carried an iron bowl of stewed mutton, and some chupatties.

"Eat, Feringi!" he commanded roughly, but not harshly. "A slave whose ribs jut through his hide is no good to work or to fight. These niggardly Pathans would starve their grandfathers. But we Kurds are as generous as we are valiant!"

He offered the food with a gesture as of bestowing a province. Brent accepted it without thanks, and ate voraciously. Shirkuh had dominated the drama ever since he had entered it — a swashbuckler who swaggered upon the stage and would not be ignored. Even Muhammad ez Zahir was overshadowed by the overflowing vitality of the man. Shirkuh seemed a strange mixture of brutal barbarian and unsophisticated youth. There was a boyish exuberance in his swagger, and he displayed touches of naive simplicity at times. But there was nothing childish about his glittering black eyes, and he moved with a tigerish suppleness that Brent knew could be translated instantly into a blur of murderous action.

Shirkuh thrust his thumbs in his girdle now and stood looking down at the American as he ate. The light from the nearest fire of dry tamarisk branches threw his dark face into shadowy half relief and gave it somehow an older, more austere look. The shadowy half light had erased the boyishness from his countenance, replacing it with a suggestion of somberness.

"Why did you come into the hills?" he demanded abruptly.

Brent did not immediately answer; he chewed on, toying with an idea. He was in as desperate a plight as he could be in, and he saw no way out. He looked about, seeing that his captors were out of earshot. He did not see the dim shape that squirmed up behind the

boulder against which he leaned. He reached a sudden decision and spoke.

"Do you know the man called El Borak?"

Was there suspicion suddenly in the black eyes?

"I have heard of him," Shirkuh replied warily.

"I came into the hills looking for him. Can you find him? If you could get a message to him, I would pay you thirty thousand rupees."

Shirkuh scowled, as if torn between suspicion and avarice.

"I am a stranger in these hills," he said. "How could I find El Borak?"

"Then help me to escape," urged Brent. "I will pay you an equal sum."

Shirkuh tugged his mustache.

"I am one sword against thirty," he growled. "How do I know I would be paid? Feringi are all liars. I am an outlaw with a price on my head. The Turks would flay me, the Russians would shoot me, the British would hang me. There is nowhere I can go except to Rub el Harami. If I helped you to escape, that door would be barred against me, too."

"I will speak to the British for you," urged Brent. "El Borak has power. He will secure a pardon for you."

He believed what he said; besides, he was in that desperate state when a man is likely to promise anything.

Indecision flickered in the black eyes, and Shirkuh started to speak, then changed his mind, turned on his heel, and strode away. A moment later the spy crouching behind the boulders glided away without having been discovered by Brent, who sat staring in despair after Shirkuh.

Shirkuh went straight to Muhammad, gnawing strips of dried mutton as he sat cross-legged on a dingy sheepskin near a small fire

on the other side of the well. Shirkuh got there before the spy did.

"The Feringi has offered me money to take a word to El Borak," he said abruptly. "Also to aid him to escape. I bade him go to Jehannum, of course. In the Jebel Jawur I have heard of El Borak, but I have never seen him. Who is he?"

"A devil," growled Muhammad ez Zahir. "An American, like this dog. The tribes about the Khyber are his friends, and he is an adviser of the ameer, and an ally of the rajah, though he was once an outlaw. He has never dared come to Rub el Harami. I saw him once, three years ago, in the fight by Kalat-i-Ghilzai, where he and his cursed Afridis broke the back of the revolt that had else unseated the ameer. If we could catch him, Abd el Khafid would fill our mouths with gold."

"Perhaps this Feringi knows where to find him!" exclaimed Shirkuh, his eyes burning with a glitter that might have been avarice. "I will go to him and swear to deliver his message, and so trick him into telling me what he knows of El Borak."

"It is all one to me," answered Muhammad indifferently. "If I had wished to know why he came into the hills, I would have tortured it out of him before now. But my orders were merely to capture him and bring him alive to Rub el Harami. I could not turn aside, not even to capture El Borak. But if you are admitted into the city, perhaps Abd el Khafid will give you a troop to go hunting El Borak."

"I will try!"

"Allah grant you luck," said Muhammad. "El Borak is a dog. I would myself give a thousand rupees to see him hanging in the market place."

"If it be the will of Allah, you shall meet El Borak!" said Shirkuh, turning away.

Doubtless it was the play of the firelight on his face which caused his eyes to burn as they did, but Muhammad felt a curious chill play down his spine, though he could not reason why.

Shirkuh's booted feet crunched away through the shale, and a furtive, ragged shadow came out of the night and squatted at Muhammad's elbow.

"I spied on the Kurd and the infidel as you ordered," muttered the spy. "The Feringi offered Shirkuh thirty thousand rupees either to seek out El Borak and deliver a message to him, or to aid him to escape us. Shirkuh lusted for the gold, but he has been outlawed by all the Feringis, and he dares not close the one door open to him."

"Good," growled Muhammad in his beard. "Kurds are dogs; it is well that this one is in no position to bite. I will speak for him at the pass. He does not guess the choice that awaits him at the gates of Rub el Harami."

Brent was sunk in the dreamless slumber of exhaustion, despite the hardness of the rocky ground and the chill of the night. An urgent hand shook him awake, an urgent whisper checked his startled exclamation. He saw a vague shape bending over him, and heard the snoring of his guard a few feet away. Guarding a man bound and fettered was more or less of a formality of routine. Shirkuh's voice hissed in Brent's ear.

"Tell me the message you wished to send El Borak! Be swift, before the guard awakes. I could not take the message when we talked before, for there was a cursed spy listening behind that rock. I told Muhammad what passed between us, because I knew the spy would tell him anyway, and I wished to disarm suspicion before it took root. Tell me the word!"

Brent accepted the desperate gamble.

"Tell him that Richard Stockton died, but before he died, he said this: 'The Black Tigers have a new prince; they call him Abd el Khafid, but his real name is Vladimir Jakrovitch.' This man dwells in Rub el Harami, Stockton told me."

"I understand," muttered Shirkuh. "El Borak shall know."

"But what of me?" urged Brent.

“I cannot help you escape now,” muttered Shirkuh. “There are too many of them. All the guards are not asleep. Armed men patrol the outskirts of the camp, and others watch the horses — my own among them.”

“I cannot pay you unless I get away!” argued Brent.

“That is in the lap of Allah!” hissed Shirkuh. “I must slip back to my blankets now, before I am missed. Here is a cloak against the chill of the night.”

Brent felt himself enveloped in a grateful warmth, and then Shirkuh was gone, gliding away in the night with boots that made no more noise than the moccasins of a red Indian. Brent lay wondering if he had done the right thing. There was no reason why he should trust Shirkuh. But if he had done no good, at least he could not see that he had done any harm, either to himself, El Borak, or those interests menaced by the mysterious Black Tigers. He was a drowning man, clutching at straws. At last he went to sleep again, lulled by the delicious warmth of the cloak Shirkuh had thrown over him, and hoping that he would slip away in the night and ride to find Gordon — wherever he might be wandering.

III

Shirkuh’s Jest

It was Shirkuh, however, who brought the American’s breakfast to him the next morning. Shirkuh made no sign either of friendship or enmity, beyond a gruff admonition to eat heartily, as he did not wish to buy a skinny slave. But that might have been for the benefit of the guard yawning and stretching near by. Brent reflected that the cloak was sure evidence that Shirkuh had visited him in the night, but no one appeared to notice it.

As he ate, grateful at least for the good food, Brent was torn between doubts and hopes. He swung between half-hearted trust and complete mistrust of the man. Kurds were bred in deception and cut their teeth on treachery. Why should that offer of help not have

been a trick to curry favor with Muhammad ez Zahir? Yet Brent realized that if Muhammad had wished to learn the reason for his presence in the hills, the Afghan would have been more likely to resort to torture than an elaborate deception. Then Shirkuh, like all Kurds, must be avaricious, and that was Brent's best chance. And if Shirkuh delivered the message, he must go further and help Brent to escape, in order to get his reward, for Brent, a slave in Rub el Harami, could not pay him thirty thousand rupees. One service necessitated the other, if Shirkuh hoped to profit by the deal. Then there was El Borak; if he got the message, he would learn of Brent's plight, and he would hardly fail to aid a fellow Feringi in adversity. It all depended now on Shirkuh.

Brent stared intently at the supple rider, etched against the sharp dawn. There was nothing of the Turanian or the Semite in Shirkuh's features. In the Iranian highlands there must be many clans who kept their ancient Aryan lineage pure. Shirkuh, in European garments, and without that Oriental mustache, would pass unnoticed in any Western crowd, but for that primordial blaze in his restless black eyes. They reflected an untamable soul. How could he expect this barbarian to deal with him according to the standards of the Western world?

They were pressing on before sunup, and their trail always led up now, higher and higher, through knife cuts in solid masses of towering sandstone, and along narrow paths that wound up and up interminably, until Brent was gasping again with the rarefied air of the high places. At high noon, when the wind was knife-edged with ice, and the sun was a splash of molten fire, they reached the Pass of Nadir Khan — a narrow cut winding tortuously for a mile between turrets of dull-colored rock. A squat mud-and-stone tower stood in the mouth, occupied by ragged warriors squatting on their aerie like vultures. The troop halted until Muhammad ez Zahir was recognized. He vouched for the cavalcade, Shirkuh included, with a wave of his hand, and the rifles on the tower were lowered. Muhammad rode on into the pass, the others filing after him. Brent

felt despairingly as if one prison door had already slammed behind him.

They halted for the midday meal in the corridor of the pass, shaded from the sun and sheltered from the wind. Again Shirkuh brought food to Brent, without comment or objection from the Afghans. But when Brent tried to catch his eye, he avoided the American's gaze.

After they left the pass, the road pitched down in long curving sweeps, through successively lower mountains that ran away and away like gigantic stairsteps from the crest of the range. The trail grew plainer, more traveled, but night found them still among the hills.

When Shirkuh brought food to Brent that night as usual, the American tried to engage him in conversation, under cover of casual talk for the benefit of the Afghan detailed to guard the American that night, who lolled near by, bolting chupatties.

"Is Rub el Harami a large city?" Brent asked.

"I have never been there," returned Shirkuh, rather shortly.

"Is Abd el Khafid the ruler?" persisted Brent.

"He is emir of Rub el Harami," said Shirkuh.

"And prince of the Black Tigers," spoke up the Afghan guard unexpectedly. He was in a garrulous mood, and he saw no reason for secrecy. One of his hearers would soon be a slave in Rub el Harami, the other, if accepted, a member of the clan.

"I am myself a Black Tiger," the guard boasted. "All in this troop are Black Tigers, and picked men. We are the lords of Rub el Harami."

"Then all in the city are not Black Tigers?" asked Brent.

"All are thieves. Only thieves live in Rub el Harami. But not all are Black Tigers. But it is the headquarters of the clan, and the prince of the Black Tigers is always emir of Rub el Harami."

“Who ordered my capture?” inquired Brent. “Muhammad ez Zahir?”

“Muhammad only does as he is ordered,” returned the guard. “None gives orders in Rub el Harami save Abd el Khafid. He is absolute lord save where the customs of the city are involved. Not even the prince of the Black Tigers can change the customs of Rub el Harami. It was a city of thieves before the days of Genghis Khan. What its name was first, none knows; the Arabs call it Rub el Harami, the Abode of Thieves, and the name has stuck.”

“It is an outlaw city?”

“It has never owned a lord save the prince of the Black Tigers,” boasted the guard. “It pays no taxes to any save him — and to Shaitan.”

“What do you mean, to Shaitan?” demanded Shirkuh.

“It is an ancient custom,” answered the guard. “Each year a hundredweight of gold is given as an offering to Shaitan, so the city shall prosper. It is sealed in a secret cave somewhere near the city, but where no man knows, save the prince and the council of imams.”

“Devil worship!” snorted Shirkuh. “It is an offense to Allah!”

“It is an ancient custom,” defended the guard.

Shirkuh strode off, as if scandalized, and Brent lapsed into disappointed silence. He wrapped himself in Shirkuh’s cloak as well as he could and slept.

They were up before dawn and pushing through the hills until they breasted a sweeping wall, down which the trail wound, and saw a rocky plain set in the midst of bare mountain chains, and the flat-topped towers of Rub el Harami rising before them.

They had not halted for the midday meal. As they neared the city, the trail became a well-traveled road. They overtook or met men on horses, men walking and driving laden mules. Brent remembered that it had been said that only stolen goods entered Rub el Harami. Its inhabitants were the scum of the hills, and the men they

encountered looked it. Brent found himself comparing them with Shirkuh. The man was a wild outlaw, who boasted of his bloody crimes, but he was a clean-cut barbarian. He differed from these as a gray wolf differs from mangy alley curs.

He eyed all they met or passed with a gaze half naive, half challenging. He was boyishly interested; he was ready to fight at the flick of a turban end, and gave the road to no man. He was the youth of the world incarnated, credulous, merry, hot-headed, generous, cruel, and arrogant. And Brent knew his life hung on the young savage's changing whims.

Rub el Harami was a walled city standing in the narrow rock-strewn plain hemmed in by bare hills. A battery of field pieces could have knocked down its walls with a dozen volleys — but the army never marched that could have dragged field pieces over the road that led to it through the Pass of Nadir Khan. Its gray walls loomed bleakly above the gray dusty waste of the small plain. A chill wind from the northern peaks brought a tang of snow and started the dust spinning. Well curbs rose gauntly here and there on the plain, and near each well stood a cluster of squalid huts. Peasants in rags bent their backs over sterile patches that yielded grudging crops — mere smudges on the dusty expanse. The low-hanging sun turned the dust to a bloody haze in the air, as the troop with its prisoner trudged on weary horses across the plain to the gaunt city.

Beneath a lowering arch, flanked by squat watchtowers, an iron-bolted gate stood open, guarded by a dozen swashbucklers whose girdles bristled with daggers. They clicked the bolts of their German rifles and stared arrogantly about them, as if itching to practice on some living target.

The troop halted, and the captain of the guard swaggered forth, a giant with bulging muscles and a henna-stained beard.

"Thy names and business!" he roared, glaring intolerantly at Brent.

“My name you know as well as you know your own,” growled Muhammad ez Zahir. “I am taking a prisoner into the city, by order of Abd el Khafid.”

“Pass, Muhammad ez Zahir,” growled the captain. “But who is this Kurd?”

Muhammad grinned wolfishly, as if at a secret jest.

“An adventurer who seeks admission — Shirkuh, of the Jebel Jawur.”

While they were speaking, a richly clad, powerfully built man on a white mare rode out of the gate and halted, unnoticed, behind the guardsmen. The henna-bearded captain turned toward Shirkuh who had dismounted to get a pebble out of his stallion’s hoof.

“Are you one of the clan?” he demanded. “Do you know the secret signs?”

“I have not yet been accepted,” answered Shirkuh, turning to face him. “Men tell me I must be passed upon by the council of imams.”

“Aye, if you reach them! Does any chief of the city speak for you?”

“I am a stranger,” replied Shirkuh shortly.

“We like not strangers in Rub el Harami,” said the captain. “There are but three ways a stranger may enter the city. As a captive, like that infidel dog yonder; as one vouched for and indorsed by some established chief of the city; or” — he showed yellow fangs in an evil grin — “as the slayer of some fighting man of the city!”

He shifted the rifle to his right hand and slapped the butt with his left palm. Sardonic laughter rose about them, the dry, strident, cruel cackling of the hills. Those who laughed knew that in any kind of fight between a stranger and a man of the city every foul advantage would be taken. For a stranger to be forced into a formal duel with a Black Tiger was tantamount to signing his death warrant. Brent, rigid with sudden concern, guessed this from the vicious laughter.

But Shirkuh did not seem abashed.

“It is an ancient custom?” he asked naively, dropping a hand to his girdle.

“Ancient as Islam!” assured the giant captain, towering above him. “A tried warrior, with weapons in his hands, thou must slay!”

“Why, then —”

Shirkuh laughed, and as he laughed, he struck. His motion was as quick as the blurring stroke of a cobra. In one movement he whipped the dagger from his girdle and struck upward under the captain’s bearded chin. The Afghan had no opportunity to defend himself, no chance to lift rifle or draw sword. Before he realized Shirkuh’s intention, he was down, his life gushing out of his sliced jugular.

An instant of stunned silence was broken by wild yells of laughter from the lookers-on and the men of the troop. It was just such a

devilish jest as the bloodthirsty hill natures appreciated. There is humor in the hills, but it is a fiendish humor. The strange youth had shown a glint of the hard wolfish sophistication that underlay his apparent callowness.

But the other guardsmen cried out angrily and surged forward, with a sharp rattle of rifle bolts. Shirkuh sprang back and tore his rifle from its saddle scabbard. Muhammad and his men looked on cynically. It was none of their affair. They had enjoyed Shirkuh's grim and bitter jest; they would equally enjoy the sight of him being shot down by his victim's comrades.

But before a finger could crook on a trigger, the man on the white mare rode forward, beating down the rifles of the guards with a riding whip.

"Stop!" he commanded. "The Kurd is in the right. He slew according to the law. The man's weapons were in his hands, and he was a tried warrior."

"But he was taken unaware!" they clamored.

"The more fool he!" was the callous retort. "The law makes no point of that. I speak for the Kurd. And I am Alafdal Khan, once of Waziristan."

"Nay, we know you, my lord!" The guardsmen salaamed profoundly.

Muhammad ez Zahir gathered up his reins and spoke to Shirkuh.

"Your luck still holds, Kurd!"

"Allah loves brave men!" Shirkuh laughed, swinging into the saddle.

Muhammad ez Zahir rode under the arch, and the troop streamed after him, their captive in their midst. They traversed a short narrow street, winding between walls of mud and wood, where overhanging balconies almost touched each other over the crooked way. Brent saw women staring at them through the lattices. The cavalcade emerged into a square much like that of any other hill town. Open shops and stalls lined it, and it was thronged by a colorful crowd.

But there was a difference. The crowd was too heterogenous, for one thing; then there was too much wealth in sight. The town was prosperous, but with a sinister, unnatural prosperity. Gold and silk gleamed on barefooted ruffians whose proper garb was rags, and the goods displayed in the shops seemed mute evidence of murder and pillage. This was in truth a city of thieves.

The throng was lawless and turbulent, its temper set on a hair trigger. There were human skulls nailed above the gate, and in an iron cage made fast to the wall Brent saw a human skeleton.

Vultures perched on the bars. Brent felt cold sweat bead his flesh. That might well be his own fate — to starve slowly in an iron cage hung above the heads of the jeering crowd. A sick abhorrence and a fierce hatred of this vile city swept over him.

As they rode into the city, Alafdal Khan drew his mare alongside Shirkuh's stallion. The Waziri was a bull-shouldered man with a bushy purple-stained beard and wide, ox-like eyes.

"I like you, Kurd," he announced. "You are in truth a mountain lion. Take service with me. A masterless man is a broken blade in Rub el Harami."

"I thought Abd el Khafid was master of Rub el Harami," said Shirkuh.

"Aye! But the city is divided into factions, and each man who is wise follows one chief or the other. Only picked men with long years of service behind them are chosen for Abd el Khafid's house troops. The others follow various lords, who are each responsible to the emir."

"I am my own man!" boasted Shirkuh. "But you spoke for me at the gate. What devil's custom is this, when a stranger must kill a man to enter?"

"In old times it was meant to test a stranger's valor, and make sure that each man who came into Rub el Harami was a tried warrior," said Alafdal. "For generations, however, it has become merely an excuse to murder strangers. Few come uninvited. You should have secured the patronage of some chief of the clan before you came. Then you could have entered the city peacefully."

"I knew no man in the clan," muttered Shirkuh. "There are no Black Tigers in the Jebel Jawur. But men say the clan is coming to life, after slumbering in idleness for a hundred years, and —"

A disturbance in the crowd ahead of them interrupted him. The people in the square had massed thickly about the troop, slowing their progress, and growling ominously at the sight of Brent. Curses

were howled, and bits of offal and refuse thrown, and now a scarred Shinwari stooped and caught up a stone which he cast at the white man. The missile grazed Brent's ear, drawing blood, and with a curse Shirkuh drove his horse against the fellow, knocking him down. A deep roar rose from the mob, and it surged forward menacingly. Shirkuh dragged his rifle from under his knee, but Alafdal Khan caught his arm.

"Nay, brother! Do not fire. Leave these dogs to me."

He lifted his voice in a bull's bellow which carried across the square.

"Peace, my children! This is Shirkuh, of Jebel Jawur, who has come to be one of us. I speak for him — I, Alafdal Khan!"

A cheer rose from the crowd whose spirit was as vagrant and changeable as a leaf tossed in the wind. Obviously the Waziri was popular in Rub el Harami, and Brent guessed why as he saw Alafdal thrust a hand into a money pouch he carried at his girdle. But before the chief could completely mollify the mob by flinging a handful of coins among them, another figure entered the central drama. It was a Ghilzai who reined his horse through the crowd — a slim man, but tall and broad-shouldered, and one who looked as though his frame were of woven steel wires. He wore a rose-colored turban; a rich girdle clasped his supple waist, and his caftan was embroidered with gilt thread. A clump of ruffians on horseback followed him.

He drew rein in front of Alafdal Khan, whose beard instantly bristled while his wide eyes dilated truculently. Shirkuh quietly exchanged his rifle for his saber.

"That is my man your Kurd rode down," said the Ghilzai, indicating the groaning ruffian now dragging his bleeding hulk away. "Do you set your men on mine in the streets, Alafdal Khan?"

The people fell tensely silent, their own passions forgotten in the rivalry of the chiefs. Even Brent could tell that this was no new antagonism, but the rankling of an old quarrel. The Ghilzai was

alert, sneering, coldly provocative. Alafdal Khan was belligerent, angry, yet uneasy.

"Your man began it, Ali Shah," he growled. "Stand aside. We take a prisoner to the Abode of the Damned."

Brent sensed that Alafdal Khan was avoiding the issue. Yet he did not lack followers. Hard-eyed men with weapons in their girdles, some on foot, some on horseback, pushed through the throng and ranged themselves behind the Waziri. It was not physical courage Alafdal lacked, but some fiber of decision.

At Alafdal's declaration, which placed him in the position of one engaged in the emir's business, and therefore not to be interfered with — a statement at which Muhammad ez Zahir smiled cynically — Ali Shah hesitated, and the tense instant might have smoldered out, had it not been for one of the Ghilzai's men — a lean Orakzai, with hashish madness in his eyes. Standing in the edge of the crowd, he rested a rifle over the shoulder of the man in front of him and fired point-blank at the Waziri chief. Only the convulsive start of the owner of the shoulder saved Alafdal Khan. The bullet tore a piece out of his turban, and before the Orakzai could fire again, Shirkuh rode at him and cut him down with a stroke that split his head to the teeth.

It was like throwing a lighted match into a powder mill. In an instant the square was a seething battle ground, where the adherents of the rival chiefs leaped at each others' throats with all the zeal ordinary men generally display in fighting somebody else's battle. Muhammad ez Zahir, unable to force his way through the heaving mass, stolidly drew his troopers in a solid ring around his prisoner. He had not interfered when the stones were cast. Stones would not kill the Feringi, and he was concerned only in getting Brent to his master alive and able to talk. He did not care how bloody and battered he might be. But in this melee a chance stroke might kill the infidel. His men faced outward, beating off attempts to get at their prisoner. Otherwise they took no part in the fighting.

This brawl between rival chiefs, common enough in Rub el Harami, was none of Muhammad's affair.

Brent watched fascinated. But for modern weapons it might have been a riot in ancient Babylon, Cairo, or Nineveh — the same old jealousies, same old passions, same old instinct of the common man fiercely to take up some lordling's quarrel. He saw gaudily clad horsemen curvetting and caracoling as they slashed at each other with tulwars that were arcs of fire in the setting sun, and he saw ragged rascals belaboring each other with staves and cobblestones. No more shots were fired; it seemed an unwritten law that firearms were not to be used in street fighting. Or perhaps ammunition was too precious for them to waste on each other.

But it was bloody enough while it lasted, and it littered the square with stunned and bleeding figures. Men with broken heads went down under the stamping hoofs, and some of them did not get up again. Ali Shah's retainers outnumbered Alafdal Khan's, but the majority of the crowd were for the Waziri, as evidenced by the fragments of stone and wood that whizzed about the ears of his enemies. One of these well-meant missiles almost proved their champion's undoing. It was a potsherd, hurled with more zeal than accuracy at Ali Shah. It missed him and crashed full against Alafdal's bearded chin with an impact that filled the Waziri's eyes with tears and stars.

As he reeled in his saddle, his sword arm sinking, Ali Shah spurred at him, lifting his tulwar. There was murder in the air, while the blinded giant groped dazedly, sensing his peril. But Shirkuh was between them, lunging through the crowd like a driven bolt. He caught the swinging tulwar on his saber, and struck back, rising in his stirrups to add force to the blow. His blade struck flat, but it broke the left arm Ali Shah threw up in desperation, and beat down on the Ghilzai's turban with a fury that stretched the chief bleeding and senseless on the trampled cobblestones.

A gratified yell went up from the crowd, and Ali Shah's men fell back, confused and intimidated. Then there rose a thunder of hoofs, and a troop of men in compact formation swept the crowd to right

and left as they plunged ruthlessly through. They were tall men in black chain armor and spired helmets, and their leader was a black-bearded Yusufzai, resplendent in gold-chased steel.

“Give way!” he ordered, with the hard arrogance of authority. “Clear the *suk*, in the name of Abd el Khafid, emir of Rub el Harami!”

“The Black Tigers!” muttered the people, giving back, but watching Alafdal Khan expectantly.

For an instant it seemed that the Waziri would defy the riders. His beard bristled, his eyes dilated — then he wavered, shrugged his giant shoulders, and sheathed his tulwar.

“Obey the law, my children,” he advised them, and, not to be cheated out of the gesture he loved, he reached into his bulging pouch and sent a golden shower over their heads.

They went scrambling after the coins, shouting, and cheering, and laughing, and somebody yelled audaciously:

“Hail, Alafdal Khan, emir of Rub el Harami!”

Alafdal’s countenance was an almost comical mingling of vanity and apprehension. He eyed the Yusufzai captain sidewise half triumphantly, half uneasily, tugging at his purple beard. The captain said crisply:

“Let there be an end to this nonsense. Alafdal Khan, the emir will hold you to account if any more fighting occurs. He is weary of this quarrel.”

“Ali Shah started it!” roared the Waziri heatedly.

The crowd rumbled menacingly behind him, stooping furtively for stones and sticks. Again that half-exultant, half-frightened look flitted across Alafdal’s broad face. The Yusufzai laughed sardonically.

“Too much popularity in the streets may cost a man his head in the palace!” said he, and turning away, he began clearing the

square.

The mob fell back sullenly, growling in their beards, not exactly flinching from the prodding lances of the riders, but retiring grudgingly and with menace in their bearing. Brent believed that all they needed to rise in bloody revolt was a determined leader. Ali Shah's men picked up their senseless chief and lifted him into his saddle; they moved off across the *suk* with the leader lolling drunkenly in their midst. The fallen men who were able to stand were hustled to their feet by the Black Tigers.

Alafdal glared after them in a curiously helpless anger, his hand in his purple beard. Then he rumbled like a bear and rode off with his men, the wounded ones swaying on the saddles of their companions. Shirkuh rode with him, and as he reined away, he shot a glance at Brent which the American hoped meant that he was not deserting him.

Muhammad ez Zahir led his men and captive out of the square and down a winding street, cackling sardonically in his beard as he went.

"Alafdal Khan is ambitious and fearful, which is a sorry combination. He hates Ali Shah, yet avoids bringing the feud to a climax. He would like to be emir of Rub el Harami, but he doubts his own strength. He will never do anything but guzzle wine and throw money to the multitude. The fool! Yet he fights like a hungry bear once he is roused."

A trooper nudged Brent and pointed ahead of them to a squat building with iron-barred windows.

“The Abode of the Damned, Feringi!” he said maliciously. “No prisoner ever escaped therefrom — and none ever spent more than one night there.”

At the door Muhammad gave his captive in charge of a one-eyed Sudozai with a squad of brutal-looking blacks armed with whips and bludgeons. These led him up a dimly lighted corridor to a cell with a barred door. Into this they thrust him. They placed on the floor a

vessel of scummy water and a flat loaf of moldy bread, and then filed out. The key turned in the lock with a chillingly final sound.

A few last rays of the sunset's afterglow found their way through the tiny, high, thick-barred window. Brent ate and drank mechanically, a prey to sick forebodings. All his future hinged now on Shirkuh, and Brent felt it was a chance as thin as a sword edge. Stiffly he stretched himself on the musty straw heaped in one corner. As he sank to sleep, he wondered dimly if there had ever really been a trim, exquisitely tailored person named Stuart Brent who slept in a soft bed and drank iced drinks out of slim-stemmed glasses, and danced with pink-and-white visions of feminine loveliness under tinted electric lights. It was a far-off dream; this was reality — rotten straw that crawled with vermin, smelly water and stale bread, and the scent of spilled blood that still seemed to cling to his garments after the fight in the square.

IV
Crooked Paths

Brent awoke with the light of a torch dazzling his eyes. This torch was placed in a socket in the wall, and when his eyes became accustomed to the wavering glare, he saw a tall, powerful man in a long satin caftan and a green turban with a gold brooch. From beneath this turban, wide gray eyes, as cold as a sword of ice, regarded him contemplatively.

"You are Stuart Brent."

It was a statement, not a question. The man spoke English with only a hint of an accent; but that hint was unmistakable. Brent made no reply. This was Abd el Khafid, of course, but it was like meeting a character of fable clothed in flesh. Abd el Khafid and El Borak had begun to take on the appearance in Brent's worn brain of symbolic will-o'-the-wisps, nonexistent twin phantoms luring him to his doom. But here stood half of that phantasm, living and speaking. Perhaps El Borak was equally real, after all.

Brent studied the man almost impersonally. He looked Oriental enough in that garb, with his black pointed beard. But his hands were too big for a high-caste Moslem's hands — sinewy, ruthless hands that looked as if they could grasp either a sword hilt or a scepter. The body under the caftan appeared hard and capable — not with the tigerish suppleness of Shirkuh, but strong and quick, nevertheless.

"My spies watched you all the way from San Francisco," said Abd el Khafid. "They knew when you bought a steamship ticket to India. Their reports were wired by relays to Kabul — I have my secret wireless sets and spies in every capital of Asia — and thence here. I have my wireless set hidden back in the hills, here. Inconvenient, but the people would not stand for it in the city. It was a violation of custom. Rub el Harami rests on a foundation of customs — irksome at times, but mostly useful.

"I knew you would not have immediately sailed for India had not Richard Stockton told you something before he died, and I thought at first of having you killed as soon as you stepped off the ship. Then I decided to wait a bit and try to learn just how much you knew before I had you removed. Spies sent me word that you were coming North — that apparently you had told the British only that you wished to find El Borak. I knew then that Stockton had told you to find El Borak and tell him my true identity. Stockton was a human bloodhound, but it was only through the indiscretion of a servant that he learned the secret.

"Stockton knew that the only man who could harm me was El Borak. I am safe from the English here, safe from the ameer. El Borak could cause me trouble, if he suspected my true identity. As it is, so long as he considers me merely Abd el Khafid, a Moslem fanatic from Samarkand, he will not interfere. But if he should learn who I really am, he would guess why I am here, and what I am doing.

"So I let you come up the Khyber unmolested. It was evident by this time that you intended giving the news directly to El Borak, and my spies told me El Borak had vanished in the hills. I knew when

you left Kabul, searching for him, and I sent Muhammad ez Zahir to capture and bring you here. You were easy to trace — a *Melakani* wandering in the hills with a band of Kabuli soldiery. So you entered Rub el Harami at last the only way an infidel may enter — as a captive, destined for the slave block."

"You are an infidel," retorted Brent. "If I expose your true identity to these people —"

The strong shoulders under the caftan shrugged.

"The imams know I was born a Russian. They know likewise that I am a true Moslem — that I foreswore Christianity and publicly acknowledged Islam, years ago. I cut all ties that bound me to *Feringistan*. My name is Abd el Khafid. I have a right to wear this green turban. I am a hadji. I have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Tell the people of Rub el Harami that I am a Christian. They will laugh at you. To the masses I am a Moslem like themselves; to the council of imams I am a true convert."

Brent said nothing; he was in a trap he could not break.

"You are but a fly in my web," said Abd el Khafid contemptuously. "So unimportant that I intend to tell you my full purpose. It is good practice speaking in English. Sometimes I almost forget European tongues.

"The Black Tigers compose a very ancient society. It originally grew out of the bodyguard of Genghis Khan. After his death they settled in Rub el Harami, even then an outlaw city, and became the ruling caste. It expanded into a secret society, always with its headquarters here in this city. It soon became Moslem, a clan of fanatical haters of the Feringi, and the emirs sold the swords of their followers to many leaders of jihad, the holy war.

"It flourished, then decayed. A hundred years ago the clan was nearly exterminated in a hill feud, and the organization became a shadow, limited to the rulers and officials of Rub el Harami alone. But they still held the city. Ten years ago I cut loose from my people and became a Moslem, heart and soul. In my wanderings I discovered the Black Tigers, and saw their potentialities. I journeyed

to Rub el Harami, and here I stumbled upon a secret that set my brain on fire.

“But I run ahead of my tale. It was only three years ago that I gained admittance into the clan. It was during the seven years preceding that, seven years of wandering, fighting, and plotting all over Asia, that I clashed more than once with El Borak, and learned how dangerous the man was — and that we must always be enemies, since our interests and ideals were so antithetical. So when I came to Rub el Harami, I simply dropped out of sight of El Borak and all the other adventurers that like him and me rove the waste places of the East. Before I came to the city, I spent months in erasing my tracks. Vladimir Jakrovitch, known also as Akbar Shah, disappeared entirely. Not even El Borak connected him with Abd el Khafid, wanderer from Samarkand. I had stepped into a completely new role and personality. If El Borak should see me, he might suspect — but he never shall, except as my captive.

“Without interference from him I began to build up the clan, first as a member of the ranks, from which I swiftly rose, then as prince of the clan, to which position I attained less than a year ago, by means and intrigues I shall not inflict upon you. I have reorganized the society, expanded it as of old, placed my spies in every country in the world. Of course El Borak must have heard that the Black Tiger was stirring again; but to him it would mean only the spasmodic activity of a band of fanatics, without international significance.

“But he would guess its true meaning if he knew that Abd el Khafid is the man he fought up and down the length and breadth of Asia, years ago!” The man’s eyes blazed, his voice vibrated. In his super-egotism he found intense satisfaction in even so small and hostile an audience as his prisoner. “Did you ever hear of the Golden Cave of Shaitan el Kabir?

“It lies within a day’s ride of the city, so carefully hidden that an army of men might search for it forever, in vain. But I have seen it! It is a sight to madden a man — heaped from floor to roof with blocks of gold! It is the offerings to Shaitan — custom dating from

old heathen days. Each year a hundredweight of gold, levied on the people of the city, is melted and molded in small blocks, and carried and placed in the cave by the imams and the emir. And —"

"Do you mean to tell me that a treasure of that size exists near this city of thieves?" demanded Brent incredulously.

"Why not? Have you not heard the city's customs are unbending as iron? Only the imams know the secret of the cave; the knowledge is handed down from imam to imam, from emir to emir. The people do not know; they suppose the gold is taken by Shaitan to his infernal abode. If they knew, they would not touch it. Take gold dedicated to Shaitan the Damned? You little know the Oriental mind. Not a Moslem in the world would touch a grain of it, even though he were starving.

"But I am free of such superstitions. Within a few days the gift to Shaitan will be placed in the cave. It will be another year then before the imams visit the cavern again. And before that time comes around, I will have accomplished my purpose. I will secretly remove the gold from the cave, working utterly alone, and will melt it down and recast it in different forms. Oh, I understand the art and have the proper equipment. When I have finished, none can recognize it as the accursed gold of Shaitan.

"With it I can feed and equip an army! I can buy rifles, ammunition, machine guns, airplanes, and mercenaries to fly them. I can arm every cutthroat in the Himalayas! These hill tribes have the makings of the finest army in the world — all they need is equipment. And that equipment I will supply. There are plenty of European sources ready to sell me whatever I want. And the gold of Shaitan will supply my needs!" The man was sweating, his eyes blazing as if madness like molten gold had entered his veins. "The world never dreamed of such a treasure-trove! The golden offerings of a thousand years heaped from floor to ceiling! And it is *mine!"*

"The imams will kill you!" whispered Brent, appalled.

"They will not know for nearly a year. I will invent a lie to explain my great wealth. They will not suspect until they open the

cave next year. Then it will be too late. Then I will be free from the Black Tigers. I will be an emperor!

"With my great new army I will sweep down into the plains of India. I will lead a horde of Afghans, Persians, Pathans, Arabs, Turkomen that will make up for discipline by numbers and ferocity. The Indian Moslems will rise! I will sweep the English out of the land! I will rule supreme from Samarkand to Cape Comorin!"

"Why do you tell me this?" asked Brent. "What's to prevent me from betraying you to the imams?"

"You will never see an imam," was the grim reply. "I will see that you have no opportunity to talk. But enough of this: I allowed you to come alive to Rub el Harami only because I wanted to learn what secret password Stockton gave you to use with the British officials. I know you had one, by the speed and ease with which you were passed up to Kabul. I have long sought to get one of my spies into the very vitals of the secret service. This password will enable me to do so. Tell me what it is."

Brent laughed sardonically, then. "You're going to kill me anyway. I certainly don't intend to deprive myself of this one tiny crumb of retaliation. I'm not going to put another weapon in your filthy hands."

"You're a fool!" exclaimed Abd el Khafid, with a flash of anger too sudden, too easily aroused for complete self-confidence. The man was on edge, and not so sure of himself as he seemed.

"Doubtless," agreed Brent tranquilly. "And what about it?"

"Very well!" Abd el Khafid restrained himself by an obvious effort. "I cannot touch you tonight. You are the property of the city, according to age-old custom not even I can ignore. But tomorrow you will be sold on the block to the highest bidder. No one wants a Feringi slave, except for the pleasure of torturing. They are too soft for hard work. I will buy you for a few rupees, and then there will be nothing to prevent my *making* you talk. Before I fling your mangled carcass out on the garbage heap for the vultures, you will have told me everything I want to know."

Abruptly he turned and stalked out of the dungeon. Brent heard his footsteps reecho hollowly on the flags of the corridor. A wisp of conversation came back faintly. Then a door slammed and there was nothing but silence and a star blinking dimly through the barred window.

In another part of the city Shirkuh lounged on a silken divan, under the glow of bronze lamps that struck sparkling glints from the rich wine brimming in golden goblets. Shirkuh drank deep, smacking his lips, desert-fashion, as a matter of politeness to his host. He seemed to have no thought in the world except the quenching of his thirst, but Alafdal Khan, on another couch, knit his brows in perplexity. He was uncovering astonishing discoveries in this wild young warrior from the western mountains — unsuspected subtleties and hidden depths.

"Why do you wish to buy this *Melakani*?" he demanded.

"He is necessary to us," asserted Shirkuh. With the bronze lamps throwing his face into half shadow, the boyishness was gone, replaced by a keen hawklike hardness and maturity.

"We must have him. I will buy him in the *suk* tomorrow, and he will aid us in making you emir of Rub el Harami."

"But you have no money!" expostulated the Waziri.

"You must lend it to me."

"But Abd el Khafid desires him," argued Alafdal Khan. "He sent Muhammad ez Zahir out to capture him. It would be unwise to bid against the emir."

Shirkuh emptied his cup before answering.

"From what you have told me of the city," he said presently, "this is the situation. Only a certain per cent of the citizens are Black Tigers. They constitute a ruling caste and a sort of police force to support the emir. The emirs are complete despots, except when checked by customs whose roots are lost in the mists of antiquity.

They rule with an iron rein over a turbulent and lawless population, composed of the dregs and scum of Central Asia."

"That is true," agreed Alafdal Khan.

"But in the past, the people have risen and deposed a ruler who trampled on tradition, forcing the Black Tigers to elevate another prince. Very well. You have told me that the number of Black Tigers in the city is comparatively small at present. Many have been sent as spies or emissaries to other regions. You yourself are high in the ranks of the clan."

"An empty honor," said Alafdal bitterly. "My advice is never asked in council. I have no authority except with my own personal retainers. And they are less than those of Abd el Khafid or Ali Shah."

"It is upon the crowd in the streets we must rely," replied Shirkuh. "You are popular with the masses. They are almost ready to rise under you, were you to declare yourself. But that will come later. They need a leader and a motive. We will supply both. But first we must secure the Feringi. With him safe in our hands, we will plan our next move in the game."

Alafdal Khan scowled, his powerful fingers knotting about the slender stem of the wineglass. Conflicting emotions of vanity, ambition, and fear played across his broad face.

"You talk high!" he complained. "You ride into Rub el Harami, a penniless adventurer, and say you can make me emir of the city! How do I know you are not an empty bag of wind? How can you make me prince of Rub el Harami?"

Shirkuh set down his wineglass and rose, folding his arms. He looked somberly down at the astounded Waziri, all naiveness and reckless humor gone out of his face. He spoke a single phrase, and Alafdal ejaculated stranglingly and lurched to his feet, spilling his wine. He reeled like a drunkard, clutching at the divan, his dilated eyes searching, with a fierce intensity, the dark, immobile face before him.

"Do you believe, now, that I can make you emir of Rub el Harami?" demanded Shirkuh.

“Who could doubt it?” panted Alafdal. “Have you not put kings on their thrones? But you are mad, to come here! One word to the mob and they would rend you limb from limb!”

“You will not speak that word,” said Shirkuh with conviction. “You will not throw away the lordship of Rub el Harami.”

And Alafdal nodded slowly, the fire of ambition surging redly in his eyes.

V

Swords in the *Suk*

Dawn streaming grayly through the barred window awakened Brent. He reflected that it might be the last dawn he would see as a free man. He laughed wryly at the thought. Free? Yet at least he was still a captive, not a slave. There was a vast difference between a captive and a slave — a revolting gulf, in which, crossing, a man or woman’s self-respect must be forever lost.

Presently black slaves came with a jug of cheap sour wine, and food — chupatties, rice cakes, dried dates. Royal fare compared with his supper the night before. A Tajik barber shaved him and trimmed his hair, and he was allowed the luxury of scrubbing himself pink in the prison bath.

He was grateful for the opportunity, but the whole proceeding was disgusting. He felt like a prize animal being curried and groomed for display. Some whim prompted him to ask the barber where the proceeds of his sale would go, and the man answered into the city treasury, to keep the walls repaired. A singularly unromantic usage for the price of a human being, but typical of the hard practicality of the East. Brent thought fleetingly of Shirkuh, then shrugged his shoulders. Apparently the Kurd had abandoned him to his fate.

Clad only in a loin cloth and sandals, he was led from the prison by the one-eyed Sudozai and a huge black slave. Horses were waiting for them at the gate, and he was ordered to mount. Between

the slave masters he clattered up the street before the sun was up. But already the crowd was gathering in the square. The auctioning of a white man was an event, and there was, furthermore, a feeling of expectancy in the air, sharpened by the fight of the day before.

In the midst of the square there stood a thick platform built solidly of stone blocks; it was perhaps four feet high and thirty feet across. On this platform the Sudozai took his stand, grasping a piece of rope which was tied loosely about Brent's neck. Behind them stood the stolid Soudanese with a drawn scimitar on his shoulder.

Before, and to one side of the block the crowd had left a space clear, and there Abd el Khafid sat his horse, amid a troop of Black Tigers, bizarre in their ceremonial armor. Ceremonial it must be, reflected Brent; it might turn a sword blade, but it would afford no protection against a bullet. But it was one of the many fantastic customs of the city, where tradition took the place of written law. The bodyguard of the emir had always worn black armor. Therefore, they would always wear it. Muhammad ez Zahir commanded them. Brent did not see Ali Shah.

Another custom was responsible for the presence of Abd el Khafid, instead of sending a servant to buy the American for him; not even the emir could bid by proxy.

As he climbed upon the block, Brent heard a cheer, and saw Alafdal Khan and Shirkuh pushing through the throng on their horses. Behind them came thirty-five warriors, well armed and well mounted. The Waziri chief was plainly nervous, but Shirkuh strutted like a peacock, even on horseback, before the admiring gaze of the throng.

At the ringing ovation given them, annoyance flitted across Abd el Khafid's broad, pale face, and that expression was followed by a more sinister darkening that boded ill for the Waziri and his ally.

The auction began abruptly and undramatically. The Sudozai began in a singsong voice to narrate the desirable physical points of the prisoner, when Abd el Khafid cut him short and offered fifty rupees.

“A hundred!” instantly yelled Shirkuh.

Abd el Khafid turned an irritated and menacing glare on him. Shirkuh grinned insolently, and the crowd hugged itself, sensing a conflict of the sort it loved.

“Three hundred!” snarled the emir, meaning to squelch this irreverent vagabond without delay.

“Four hundred!” shouted Shirkuh.

“A thousand!” cried Adb el Khafid in a passion.

“Eleven hundred!”

And Shirkuh deliberately laughed in the emir’s face, and the crowd laughed with him. Abd el Khafid appeared at a disadvantage, for he was a bit confused at this unexpected opposition, and had lost his temper too easily. The fierce eyes of the crowd missed nothing of this, for it is on such points the wolf pack ceaselessly and pitilessly judges its leader. Their sympathies swung to the laughing, youthful stranger, sitting his horse with careless ease.

Brent’s heart had leaped into his throat at the first sound of Shirkuh’s voice. If the man meant to aid him, this was the most obvious way to take. Then his heart sank again at the determination in Abd el Khafid’s angry face. The emir would never let his captive slip between his fingers. And though the Gift of Shaitan was not yet in the Russian’s possession, yet doubtless his private resources were too great for Shirkuh. In a contest of finances Shirkuh was foredoomed to lose.

Brent’s conclusions were not those of Abd el Khafid. The emir shot a glance at Alafdal Khan, shifting uneasily in his saddle. He saw the beads of moisture gathered on the Waziri’s broad brow, and realized a collusion between the men. New anger blazed in the emir’s eyes.

In his way Abd el Khafid was miserly. He was willing to squander gold like water on a main objective, but it irked him exceedingly to pay an exorbitant price to attain a minor goal. He knew — every man in the crowd knew now — that Alafdal Khan was backing Shirkuh. And all men knew that the Waziri was one of the

wealthiest men in the city, and a prodigal spender. Abd el Khafid's nostrils pinched in with wrath as he realized the heights of extravagance to which he might be forced, did Shirkuh persist in this impertinent opposition to his wishes. The Gift of Shaitan was not yet in his hands, and his private funds were drained constantly by the expenses of his spy system and his various intrigues. He raised the bid in a harsh, anger-edged voice.

Brent, studying the drama with the keen, understanding eyes of a gambler, realized that Abd el Khafid had got off on the wrong foot. Shirkuh's bearing appealed to the crowd. They laughed at his sallies, which were salty and sparkling with all the age-old ribaldry of the East, and they hissed covertly at the emir, under cover of their neighbors.

The bidding mounted to unexpected heights. Abd el Khafid, white about the nostrils as he sensed the growing hostility of the crowd, did not speak except to snarl his offers. Shirkuh rolled in his saddle, slapped his thighs, yelled his bids, and defiantly brandished a leathern bag which gave out a musical tinkling.

The excitement of the crowd was at white heat. Ferocity began to edge their yells. Brent, looking down at the heaving mass, had a confused impression of dark, convulsed faces, blazing eyes, and strident voices. Alafdal Khan was sweating, but he did not interfere, not even when the bidding rose above fifty thousand rupees.

It was more than a bidding contest; it was the subtle play of two opposing wills, as hard and supple as tempered steel. Abd el Khafid realized that if he withdrew now, his prestige would never recover from the blow. In his rage he made his first mistake.

He rose suddenly in his stirrups, clapping his hands.

"Let there be an end to this madness!" he roared. "No white slave is worth this much! I declare the auction closed! I buy this dog for sixty thousand rupees! Take him to my house, slave master!"

A roar of protest rose from the throng, and Shirkuh drove his horse alongside the block and leaped off to it, tossing his rein to a Waziri.

“Is this justice?” he shouted. “Is this done according to custom? Men of Rub el Harami, I demand justice! I bid sixty-one thousand rupees. I stand ready to bid more, if necessary! When has an emir been allowed to use his authority to rob a citizen, and cheat the people? Nay, we be thieves — but shall we rob one another? Who is Abd el Khafid, to trample the customs of the city! If the customs are broken, what shall hold you together? Rub el Harami lives only so long as the ancient traditions are observed. Will you let Abd el Khafid destroy them — and you?”

A cataract of straining human voices answered him. The crowd had become a myriad-fanged, flashing-eyed mass of hate.

“Obey the customs!” yelled Shirkuh, and the crowd took up the yell.

“Obey the customs!” It was the thunder of unreined seas, the roar of a storm wind ripping through icy passes. Blindly men seized the slogan, yowling it under a forest of lean arms and clenched fists. Men go mad on a slogan; conquerors have swept to empire, prophets to new world religions on a shouted phrase. All the men in the square were screaming it like a ritual now, rocking and tossing on their feet, fists clenched, froth on their lips. They no longer reasoned; they were a forest of blind human emotions, swayed by the storm wind of a shouted phrase that embodied passion and the urge to action.

Abd el Khafid lost his head. He drew his sword and cut a man who was clawing at his stirrup mouthing: “Obey the customs, emir!” and the spurt of blood edged the yells with murder lust. But as yet the mob was only a blind, raging monster without a head.

“Clear the *suk!”* shouted Abd el Khafid.

The lances dipped, and the Black Tigers moved forward uncertainly. A hail of stones greeted them.

Shirkuh leaped to the edge of the block, lifting his arms, shouting, cutting the volume of sound by the knifing intensity of his yell.

“Down with Abd el Khafid! Hail, Alafdal Khan, emir of Rub el Harami!”

“Hail, Alafdal Khan!” came back from the crowd like a thunderclap.

Abd el Khafid rose in his stirrups, livid.

“Fools! Are you utterly mad? Shall I call my riders to sweep the streets clear of you?”

Shirkuh threw back his head and laughed like a wolf howling.

“Call them!” he yelled. “Before you can gather them from the taverns and dens, we will stain the square with your blood! Prove your right to rule! You have violated one custom — redeem yourself by another! Men of Rub el Harami, is it not a tradition that an emir must be able to defend his title with the sword?”

“Aye!” roared back the mob.

“Then let Abd el Khafid fight Alafdal Khan!” shouted Shirkuh.

“Let them fight!” bellowed the mob.

Abd el Khafid’s eyes turned red. He was sure of his prowess with the sword, but this revolt against his authority enraged him to the point of insanity. This was the very center of his power; here like a spider he had spun his webs, expecting attack on the fringes, but never here. Now he was caught off-guard. Too many trusted henchmen were far afield. Others were scattered throughout the city, useless to him at the moment. His bodyguard was too small to defy the crowd. Mentally he promised himself a feast of hangings and beheadings when he could bring back a sufficient force of men to Rub el Harami. In the meantime he would settle Alafdal’s ambitions permanently.

“Kingmaker, eh?” he snarled in Shirkuh’s face, as he leaped off his horse to the block. He whipped out his tulwar and swung it around his head, a sheen of silver in the sun. “I’ll nail your head to the Herati Gate when I’ve finished with this ox-eyed fool!”

Shirkuh laughed at him and stepped back, herding the slave masters and their captive to the back of the block. Alafdal Khan was scrambling to the platform, his tulwar in his hand.

He was not fully straightened on the block when Abd el Khafid was on him with the fury of a tornado. The crowd cried out, fearing that the emir's whirlwind speed would envelop the powerful but slower chief. But it was this very swiftness that undid the Russian. In his wild fury to kill, Abd el Khafid forgot judgment. The stroke he aimed at Alafdal's head would have decapitated an ox; but he began it in mid-stride, and its violence threw his descending foot out of line. He stumbled, his blade cut thin air as Alafdal dodged — and then the Waziri's sword was through him.

It was over in a flash. Abd el Khafid had practically impaled himself on the Waziri's blade. The rush, the stroke, the counter-thrust, and the emir kicking his life out on the stone like a spitted rat — it all happened in a mere tick of time that left the mob speechless.

Shirkuh sprang forward like a panther in the instant of silence while the crowd held its breath and Alafdal gaped stupidly from the red tulwar in his hand to the dead man at his feet.

"Hail to Alafdal Khan, emir of Rub el Harami!" yelled Shirkuh, and the crowd thundered its response.

"On your horse, man, quick!" Shirkuh snarled in Alafdal's ear, thrusting him toward his steed, while seeming to bow him toward it.

The crowd was going mad with the senseless joy of a mob that sees its favorite elevated above them. As Alafdal, still dazed by the rapidity of events, clambered on his horse, Shirkuh turned on the stunned Black Tiger riders.

“Dogs!” he thundered. “Form ranks! Escort your new master to the palace, for his title to be confirmed by the council of imams!”

They were moving unwillingly forward, afraid of the crowd, when a commotion interrupted the flow of events. Ali Shah and forty armed horsemen came pushing their way through the crowd and halted beside the armored riders. The crowd bared its teeth, remembering the Ghilzai’s feud with their new emir. Yet there was iron in Ali Shah. He did not flinch, but the old indecision wavered in Alafdal’s eyes at the sight of his foe.

Shirkuh turned on Ali Shah with the swift suspicion of a tiger, but before anyone could speak, a wild figure dashed from among the Ghilzais and leaped on the block. It was the Shinwari Shirkuh had ridden down the day before. The man threw a lean arm out toward Shirkuh.

“He is an impostor, brothers!” he screamed. “I thought I knew him yesterday! An hour ago I remembered! He is no Kurd! He is —”

Shirkuh shot the man through the body. He staggered to a rolling fall that carried him to the edge of the block. There he lifted himself on an elbow, and pointed at Shirkuh. Blood spattered the Shinwari's beard as he croaked in the sudden silence:

"I swear by the beard of the Prophet, he is no Moslem! *He is El Borak!"*

A shudder passed over the crowd.

"Obey the customs!" came Ali Shah's sardonic voice in the unnatural stillness. "You killed your emir because of a small custom. There stands a man who has violated the greatest one — your enemy, El Borak!"

There was conviction in his voice, yet no one had really doubted the accusation of the dying Shinwari. The amazing revelation had struck them all dumb, Brent included. But only for an instant.

The blind reaction of the crowd was as instantaneous as it had been before. The tense stillness snapped like a banjo string to a flood of sound:

"Down with the infidels! Death to El Borak! Death to Alafdal Khan!"

To Brent it seemed that the crowd suddenly rose like a foaming torrent and flowed over the edge of the block. Above the deafening clamor he heard the crashing of the big automatic in El Borak's hand. Blood spattered, and in an instant the edge of the block was littered by writhing bodies over which the living tripped and stumbled.

El Borak sprang to Brent, knocked his guards sprawling with the pistol barrel, and seized the dazed captive, dragging him toward the black stallion to which the Waziri still clung. The mob was swarming like wolves about Alafdal and his warriors, and the Black Tigers and Ali Shah were trying to get at them through the press. Alafdal bawled something desperate and incoherent to El Borak as he laid lustily about him with his tulwar. The Waziri chief was

almost crazed with bewilderment. A moment ago he had been emir of Rub el Harami, with the crowd applauding him. Now the same crowd was trying to tear him out of his saddle.

“Make for your house, Alafdal!” yelled El Borak.

He leaped into the saddle just as the man holding the horse went down with his head shattered by a cobblestone. The wild figure who had killed him leaped forward, gibbering, clawing at the rider’s leg. El Borak drove a sharp silver heel into his eye, stretching him bleeding and screaming on the ground. He ruthlessly slashed off a hand that grasped at his rein, and beat back a ring of snarling faces with another swing of his saber.

“Get on behind me, Brent!” he ordered, holding the frantic horse close to the block.

It was only when he heard the English words, with their Southwestern accent, that Brent realized that this was no dream, and he had at last actually encountered the man he had sought.

Men were grasping at Brent. He beat them off with clenched fists, leaped on the stallion behind the saddle. He grasped the cantle, resisting the natural impulse to hold onto the man in front of him. El Borak would need the free use of his body if they won through that seething mass of frantic humanity which packed the square from edge to edge. It was a frothing, dark-waved sea, swirling about islands of horsemen.

But the stallion gathered itself and lunged terribly, knocking over screaming figures like tenpins. Bones snapped under its hoofs. Over the heads of the crowd Brent saw Ali Shah and his riders beating savagely at the mob with their swords, trying to reach Alafdal Khan. Ali Shah was cool no longer; his dark face was convulsed.

The stallion waded through that sea of humanity, its rider slashing right and left, clearing a red road. Brent felt hands clawing at them as they went by, felt the inexorable hoofs grinding over writhing bodies. Ahead of them the Waziris, in a compact formation, were cutting their way toward the west side of the square. Already a

dozen of them had been dragged from their saddles and torn to pieces.

El Borak dragged his rifle out of its boot, and it banged redly in the snarling faces, blasting a lane through them. Along that lane the black stallion thundered, to smite with irresistible impact the mass hemming in Alafdal Khan. It burst asunder, and the black horse sped on, while its rider yelled:

"Fall in behind me! We'll make a stand at your house!"

The Waziris closed in behind him. They might have abandoned El Borak if they had had the choice. But the people included them all in their blind rage against the breakers of tradition. As they broke through the press, behind them the Black Tigers brought their rifles into play for the first time. A hail of bullets swept the square, emptying half the Waziri saddles. The survivors dashed into a narrow street.

A mass of snarling figures blocked their way. Men swarmed from the houses to cut them off. Men were surging into the alley behind them. A thrown stone numbed Brent's shoulder. El Borak was using the empty rifle like a mace. In a rush they smote the men massed in the street.

The great black stallion reared and lashed down with malletlike hoofs, and its rider flailed with a rifle stock now splintered and smeared with blood. But behind them Alafdal's steed stumbled and fell. Alafdal's disordered turban and his dripping tulwar appeared for an instant above a sea of heads and tossing arms. His men plunged madly in to rescue him and were hemmed in by a solid mass of humanity as more men surged down the street from the square. Hamstrung horses went down, screaming. El Borak wheeled his stallion back toward the melee, and as he did so, a swarm of men burst from a narrow alleyway. One seized Brent's leg and dragged him from the horse. As they rolled in the dust, the Afghan heaved Brent below him, mouthing like an ape, and lifted a crooked knife. Brent saw it glint in the sunlight, had an instant's numb realization of doom — then El Borak, reining the rearing stallion

around, leaned from the saddle and smashed the Afghan's skull with his rifle butt.

The man fell across Brent, and then from an arched doorway an ancient blunderbuss banged, and the stallion reared and fell sprawling, half its head shot away. El Borak leaped clear, hit on his feet like a cat, and hurled the broken rifle in the faces of the swarm bearing down on him. He leaped back, tearing his saber clear. It flickered like lightning, and three men fell with cleft heads. But the mob was blood-mad, heedless of death. Brainlessly they rushed against him, flailing with staves and bludgeons, bearing him by their very weight back into an arched doorway. The panels splintered inward under the impact of the hurtling bodies, and El Borak vanished from Brent's sight. The mob poured in after him.

Brent cast off the limp body that lay across him and rose. He had a brief glimpse of a dark writhing mass where the fight swirled about the fallen chief, of Ali Shah and his riders beating at the crowd with their swords — then a bludgeon, wielded from behind, fell glancingly on his head, and he fell blind and senseless into the trampled dust.

Slowly consciousness returned to Stuart Brent. His head ached dully, and his hair was stiff with clotted blood. He struggled to his elbows, though the effort made his head swim sickeningly, and stared about him.

He was lying on a stone floor littered with moldy straw. Light came in from a high-barred window. There was a door with a broad barred wicket. Other figures lay near him, and one sat cross-legged, staring at him blankly. It was Alafdal Khan.

The Waziri's beard was torn, his turban gone. His features were swollen, and bruised, and skinned, one ear mangled. Three of his men lay near, one groaning. All had been frightfully beaten, and the man who groaned seemed to have a broken arm.

"They didn't kill us!" marveled Brent.

Alafdal Khan swung his great head like an ox in pain and groaned: “Cursed be the day I laid eyes on El Borak!”

One of the men crept painfully to Brent’s side.

“I am Achmet, sahib,” he said, spitting blood from a broken tooth. “There lie Hassan and Suleiman. Ali Shah and his men beat the dogs off us, but they had mauled us so that all were dead save these you see. Our lord is like one touched by Allah.”

“Are we in the Abode of the Damned?” asked Brent.

“Nay, sahib. We are in the common jail which lies near the west wall.”

“Why did they save us from the mob?”

“For a more exquisite end!” Achmet shuddered. “Does the sahib know the death the Black Tigers reserve for traitors?”

“No!” Brent’s lips were suddenly dry.

“We will be flayed tomorrow night in the square. It is an old pagan custom. Rub El Harami is a city of customs.”

“So I have learned!” agreed Brent grimly. “What of El Borak?”

“I do not know. He vanished into a house, with many men in pursuit. They must have overtaken and slain him.”

VI
The Executioner

When the door in the archway burst inward under the impact of Gordon’s iron-hard shoulders, he tumbled backward into a dim, carpeted hallway. His pursuers, crowding after him, jammed in the doorway in a sweating, cursing crush which his saber quickly turned into a shambles. Before they could clear the door of the dead, he was racing down the hall.

He made a turn to the left, ran across a chamber where veiled women squealed and scattered, emerged into a narrow alley, leaped a low wall, and found himself in a small garden. Behind him sounded the clamor of his hunters, momentarily baffled. He crossed

the garden and through a partly open door came into a winding corridor. Somewhere a slave was singing in the weird chant of the Soudan, apparently heedless of the dog-fight noises going on upon the other side of the wall. Gordon moved down the corridor, careful to keep his silver heels from clinking.

Presently he came to a winding staircase and up it he went, making no noise on the richly carpeted steps. As he came out into an upper corridor, he saw a curtained door and heard beyond it a faint, musical clinking which he recognized. He glided to the partly open door and peered through the curtains. In a richly appointed room, lighted by a tinted skylight, a portly, gray-bearded man sat with his back to the door, counting coins out of a leather bag into an ebony chest. He was so intent on the business at hand that he did not seem aware of the growing clamor below. Or perhaps street riots were too common in Rub el Harami to attract the attention of a thrifty merchant, intent only on increasing his riches.

Pad of swift feet on the stair, and Gordon slipped behind the partly open door. A richly clad young man, with a scimitar in his hand, ran up the steps and hurried to the door. He thrust the curtains aside and paused on the threshold, panting with haste and excitement.

“Father!” he shouted. “El Borak is in the city! Do you not hear the din below? They are hunting him through the houses! He may be in our very house! Men are searching the lower rooms even now!”

“Let them hunt him,” replied the old man. “Remain here with me, Abdullah. Shut that door and lock it. El Borak is a tiger.”

As the youth turned, instead of the yielding curtain behind him, he felt the contact of a hard, solid body, and simultaneously a corded arm locked about his neck, choking his startled cry. Then he felt the light prick of a knife and he went limp with fright, his scimitar sliding from his nerveless hand. The old man had turned at his son’s gasp, and now he froze, gray beneath his beard, his moneybag dangling.

Gordon thrust the youth into the room, not releasing his grip, and let the curtains close behind them.

“Do not move,” he warned the old man softly.

He dragged his trembling captive across the room and into a tapestried alcove. Before he vanished into it, he spoke briefly to the merchant:

“They are coming up the stairs, looking for me. Meet them at the door and send them away. Do not play me false by even the flick of an eyelash, if you value your son’s life.”

The old man’s eyes were dilated with pure horror. Gordon well knew the power of paternal affection. In a welter of hate, treachery, and cruelty, it was a real and vital passion, as strong as the throb of the human heart. The merchant might defy Gordon were his own life alone at stake; but the American knew he would not risk the life of his son.

Sandals stamped up the stair, and rough voices shouted. The old man hurried to the door, stumbling in his haste. He thrust his head through the curtains, in response to a bawled question. His reply came plainly to Gordon.

“El Borak? Dogs! Take your clamor from my walls! If El Borak is in the house of Nureddin el Aziz, he is in the rooms below. Ye have searched them? Then look for him elsewhere, and a curse on you!”

The footsteps dwindled down the stair, the voices faded and ceased.

Gordon pushed Abdullah out into the chamber.

“Shut the door!” the American ordered.

Nureddin obeyed, with poisonous eyes but fear-twisted face.

“I will stay in this room a while,” said Gordon. “If you play me false — if any man besides yourself crosses that threshold, the first stroke of the fight will plunge my blade in Abdullah’s heart.”

“What do you wish?” asked Nureddin nervously.

“Give me the key to that door. No, toss it on the table there. Now go forth into the streets and learn if the Feringi, or any of the Waziris live. Then return to me. And if you love your son, keep my secret!”

The merchant left the room without a word, and Gordon bound Abdullah’s wrists and ankles with strips torn from the curtains. The youth was gray with fear, incapable of resistance. Gordon laid him on a divan, and reloaded his big automatic. He discarded the tattered remnants of his robe. The white silk shirt beneath was torn, revealing his muscular breast, his close-fitting breeches smeared with blood.

Nureddin returned presently, rapping at the door and naming himself.

Gordon unlocked the door and stepped back, his pistol muzzle a few inches from Abdullah’s ear. But the old man was alone when he hurried in. He closed the door and sighed with relief to see Abdullah uninjured.

“What is your news?” demanded Gordon.

“Men comb the city for you, and Ali Shah has declared himself prince of the Black Tigers. The imams have confirmed his claim. The mob has looted Alafdal Khan’s house and slain every Waziri they could find. But the Feringi lives, and so likewise does Alafdal Khan and three of his men. They lie in the common jail. Tomorrow night they die.”

“Do your slaves suspect my presence?”

“Nay. None saw you enter.”

“Good. Bring wine and food. Abdullah shall taste it before I eat.”

“My slaves will think it strange to see me bearing food!”

“Go to the stair and call your orders down to them. Bid them set the food outside the door and then return downstairs.”

This was done, and Gordon ate and drank heartily, sitting cross-legged on the divan at Abdullah's head, his pistol on his lap.

The day wore on. El Borak sat motionless, his eternal vigilance never relaxing. The Afghans watched him, hating and fearing him. As evening approached, he spoke to Nureddin after a silence that had endured for hours.

"Go and procure for me a robe and cloak of black silk, and a black helmet such as is worn by the Black Tigers. Bring me also boots with lower heels than these — and not silver — and a mask such as members of the clan wear on secret missions."

The old man frowned. "The garments I can procure from my own shop. But how am I to secure the helmet and mask?"

"That is thy affair. Gold can open any door, they say. Go!"

As soon as Nureddin had departed, reluctantly, Gordon kicked off his boots, and next removed his mustache, using the keen-edged dagger for a razor. With its removal vanished the last trace of Shirkuh the Kurd.

Twilight had come to Rub el Harami. The room seemed full of a blue mist, blurring objects. Gordon had lighted a bronze lamp when Nureddin returned with the articles El Borak had ordered.

"Lay them on the table and sit down on the divan with your hands behind you," Gordon commanded.

When the merchant had done so, the American bound his wrists and ankles. Then Gordon donned the boots and the robe, placed the black lacquered steel helmet on his head, and drew the black cloak about him; lastly he put on the mask which fell in folds of black silk to his breast, with two slits over his eyes. Turning to Nureddin, he asked:

"Is there a likeness between me and another?"

"Allah preserve us! You are one with Dhira Azrail, the executioner of the Black Tigers, when he goes forth to slay at the emir's command."

“Good. I have heard much of this man who slays secretly, who moves through the night like a black jinn of destruction. Few have seen his face, men say.”

“Allah defend me from ever seeing it!” said Nureddin fervently.

Gordon glanced at the skylight. Stars twinkled beyond it.

“I go now from your house, Nureddin,” said he. “But lest you rouse the household in your zeal of hospitality, I must gag you and your son.”

“We will smother!” exclaimed Nureddin. “We will starve in this room!”

“You will do neither one nor the other,” Gordon assured him. “No man I gagged ever smothered. Has not Allah given you nostrils through which to breathe? Your servants will find you and release you in the morning.”

This was deftly accomplished, and Gordon advised:

“Observe that I have not touched your moneybags, and be grateful!”

He left the room, locking the door behind him. He hoped it would be several hours before either of his captives managed to work the gag out of his mouth and arouse the household with his yells.

Moving like a black-clad ghost through the dimly lighted corridors, Gordon descended the winding stair and came into the lower hallway. A black slave sat cross-legged at the foot of the stair, but his head was sunk on his broad breast, and his snores resounded through the hall. He did not see or hear the velvet-footed shadow that glided past him. Gordon slid back the bolt on the door and emerged into the garden, whose broad leaves and petals hung motionless in the still starlight. Outside, the city was silent. Men had gone early behind locked doors, and few roamed the streets, except those patrols searching ceaselessly for El Borak.

He climbed the wall and dropped into the narrow alley. He knew where the common jail was, for in his role of Shirkuh he had familiarized himself with the general features of the town. He kept

close to the wall, under the shadows of the overhanging balconies, but he did not slink. His movements were calculated to suggest a man who has no reason for concealment, but who chooses to shun conspicuousness.

The streets seemed empty. From some of the roof gardens came the wail of native citterns, or voices lifted in song. Somewhere a wretch screamed agonizingly to the impact of blows on naked flesh.

Once Gordon heard the clink of steel ahead of him and turned quickly into a dark alley to let a patrol swing past. They were men in armor, on foot, but carrying cocked rifles at the ready and peering in every direction. They kept close together, and their vigilance reflected their fear of the quarry they hunted. When they rounded the first corner, he emerged from his hiding place and hurried on.

But he had to depend on his disguise before he reached the prison. A squad of armed men rounded the corner ahead of him, and no concealment offered itself. At the sound of their footsteps he had slowed his pace to a stately stride. With his cloak folded close about him, his head slightly bent as if in somber meditation, he moved on, paying no heed to the soldiers. They shrank back, murmuring:

“Allah preserve us! It is Dhira Azrail — the Arm of the Angel of Death! An order has been given!”

They hurried on, without looking back. A few moments later Gordon had reached the lowering arch of the prison door. A dozen guardsmen stood alertly under the arch, their rifle barrels gleaming bluely in the glare of a torch thrust in a niche in the wall. These rifles were instantly leveled at the figure that moved out of the shadows. Then the men hesitated, staring wide-eyed at the somber black shape standing silently before them.

“Your pardon!” entreated the captain of the guard, saluting. “We could not recognize — in the shadow — We did not know an order had been given.”

A ghostly hand, half muffled in the black cloak, gestured toward the door, and the guardsmen opened it in stumbling haste,

salaaming deeply. As the black figure moved through, they closed the door and made fast the chain.

"The mob will see no show in the *suk* after all," muttered one.

VII
In the Prison

In the cell where Brent and his companions lay, time dragged on leaden feet. Hassan groaned with the pain of his broken arm. Suleiman cursed Ali Shah in a monotonous drone. Achmet was inclined to talk, but his comments cast no light of hope on their condition. Alafdal Khan sat like a man in a daze.

No food was given them, only scummy water that smelled. They used most of it to bathe their wounds. Brent suggested trying to set Hassan's arm, but the others showed no interest. Hassan had only another day to live. Why bother? Then there was nothing with which to make splints.

Brent mostly lay on his back, watching the little square of dry blue Himalayan sky through the barred window.

He watched the blue fade, turn pink with sunset and deep purple with twilight; it became a square of blue-black velvet, set with a cluster of white stars. Outside, in the corridor that ran between the cells, bronze lamps glowed, and he wondered vaguely how far, on the backs of groaning camels, had come the oil that filled them.

In their light a cloaked figure came down the corridor, and a scarred sardonic face was pressed to the bars. Achmet gasped, his eyes dilated.

"Do you know me, dog?" inquired the stranger.

Achmet nodded, moistening lips suddenly dry.

"Are we to die tonight, then?" he asked.

The head under the flowing headdress was shaken.

"Not unless you are fool enough to speak my name. Your companions do not know me. I have not come in my usual capacity,

but to guard the prison tonight. Ali Shah fears El Borak might seek to aid you."

"Then El Borak lives!" ejaculated Brent, to whom everything else in the conversation had been unintelligible.

"He still lives." The stranger laughed. "But he will be found, if he is still in the city. If he has fled — well, the passes have been closed by heavy guards, and horsemen are combing the plain and the hills. If he comes here tonight, he will be dealt with. Ali Shah chose to send me rather than a squad of riflemen. Not even the guards know who I am."

As he turned away toward the rear end of the corridor, Brent asked:

"Who is that man?"

But Achmet's flow of conversation had been dried up by the sight of that lean, sardonic face. He shuddered, and drew away from his companions, sitting cross-legged with bowed head. From time to time his shoulders twitched, as if he had seen a reptile or a ghoul.

Brent sighed and stretched himself on the straw. His battered limbs ached, and he was hungry.

Presently he heard the outer door clang. Voices came faintly to him, and the door closed again. Idly he wondered if they were changing the guard. Then he heard the soft rustle of cloth. A man was coming down the corridor. An instant later he came into the range of their vision, and his appearance clutched Brent with an icy dread. Clad in black from head to foot, a spired helmet gave him an appearance of unnatural height. He was enveloped in the folds of a black cloak. But the most sinister implication was in the black mask which fell in loose folds to his breast.

Brent's flesh crawled. Why was that silent, cowled figure coming to their dungeon in the blackness and stillness of the night hours?

The others glared wildly; even Alafdal was shaken out of his daze. Hassan whimpered:

“It is Dhira Azrail!”

But bewilderment mingled with the fear in Achmet’s eyes.

The scar-faced stranger came suddenly from the depths of the corridor and confronted the masked man just before the door. The lamplight fell on his face, upon which played a faint, cynical smile.

“What do you wish? I am in charge here.”

The masked man’s voice was muffled. It sounded cavernous and ghostly, fitting his appearance.

“I am Dhira Azrail. An order has been given. Open the door.”

The scarred one salaamed deeply, and murmured: “Hearkening and obedience, my lord!”

He produced a key, turned it in the lock, pulled open the heavy door, and bowed again, humbly indicating for the other to enter. The masked man was moving past him when Achmet came to life startlingly.

“El Borak!” he screamed. “Beware! *He* is Dhira Azrail!”

The masked man wheeled like a flash, and the knife the other had aimed at his back glanced from his helmet as he turned. The real Dhira Azrail snarled like a wild cat, but before he could strike again, El Borak’s right fist met his jaw with a crushing impact. Flesh, and bone, and consciousness gave way together, and the executioner sagged senseless to the floor.

As Gordon sprang into the cell, the prisoners stumbled dazedly to their feet. Except Achmet, who, knowing that the scarred man was Dhira Azrail, had realized that the man in the mask must be El Borak — and had acted accordingly — they did not grasp the situation until Gordon threw his mask back.

“Can you all walk?” rapped Gordon. “Good! We’ll have to pull out afoot. I couldn’t arrange for horses.”

Alafdal Khan looked at him dully.

“Why should I go?” he muttered. “Yesterday I had wealth and power. Now I am a penniless vagabond. If I leave Rub el Harami, the ameer will cut off my head. It was an ill day I met you, El Borak! You made a tool of me for your intrigues.”

“So I did, Alafdal Khan.” Gordon faced him squarely. “But I would have made you emir in good truth. The dice have fallen against us, but our lives remain. And a bold man can rebuild his fortune. I promise you that if we escape, the ameer will pardon you and these men.”

“His word is not wind,” urged Achmet. “He has come to aid us, when he might have escaped alone. Take heart, my lord!”

Gordon was stripping the weapons from the senseless executioner. The man wore two German automatics, a tulwar, and a curved knife. Gordon gave a pistol to Brent, and one to Alafdal; Achmet received the tulwar, and Suleiman the knife, and Gordon gave his own knife to Hassan. The executioner's garments were given to Brent, who was practically naked. The oriental garments felt strange, but he was grateful for their warmth.

The brief struggle had not produced any noise likely to be overheard by the guard beyond the arched door. Gordon led his band down the corridor, between rows of empty cells, until they came to the rear door. There was no guard outside, as it was deemed too strong to be forced by anything short of artillery. It was of massive metal, fastened by a huge bar set in gigantic iron brackets bolted powerfully into the stone. It took all Gordon's strength to lift it out of the brackets and lean it against the wall, but then the door swung silently open, revealing the blackness of a narrow alley into which they filed.

Gordon pulled the door to behind them. How much leeway they had he did not know. The guard would eventually get suspicious when the supposed Dhira Azrail did not emerge, but he believed it would take them a good while to overcome their almost superstitious dread of the executioner enough to investigate. As for the real Dhira Azrail, he would not recover his senses for hours.

The prison was not far from the west wall. They met no one as they hurried through winding, ill-smelling alleys until they reached the wall at the place where a flight of narrow steps led up to the parapets. Men were patrolling the wall. They crouched in the shadows below the stair and heard the tread of two sentries who met on the firing ledge, exchanged muffled greetings, and passed on. As the footsteps dwindled, they glided up the steps. Gordon had secured a rope from an unguarded camel stall. He made it fast by a loose loop to a merlon. One by one they slid swiftly down. Gordon

was last, and he flipped the rope loose and coiled it. They might need it again.

They crouched an instant beneath the wall. A wind stole across the plain and stirred Brent's hair. They were free, armed, and outside the devil city. But they were afoot, and the passes were closed against them. Without a word they filed after Gordon across the shadowed plain.

At a safe distance their leader halted, and the men grouped around him, a vague cluster in the starlight.

"All the roads that lead from Rub el Harami are barred against us," he said abruptly. "They've filled the passes with soldiers. We'll have to make our way through the mountains the best way we can. And the only direction in which we can hope to eventually find safety is the east."

"The Great Range bars our path to the east," muttered Alafdal Khan. "Only through the Pass of Nadir Khan may we cross it."

"There is another way," answered Gordon. "It is a pass which lies far to the north of Nadir Khan. There isn't any road leading to it, and it hasn't been used for many generations. But it has a name — the Afridis call it the Pass of Swords — and I've seen it from the east. I've never been west of it before, but maybe I can lead you to it. It lies many days' march from here, through wild mountains which none of us has ever traversed. But it's our only chance. We must have horses and food. Do any of you know where horses can be procured outside the city?"

"Yonder on the north side of the plain," said Achmet, "where a gorge opens from the hills, there dwells a peasant who owns seven horses — wretched, flea-bitten beasts they are, though."

"They must suffice. Lead us to them."

The going was not easy, for the plain was littered with rocks and cut with shallow gullies. All except Gordon were stiff and sore from their beatings, and Hassan's broken arm was a knifing agony to him. It was after more than an hour and a half of tortuous travel that the low mud-and-rock pen loomed before them and they heard the

beasts stamping and snorting within it, alarmed by the sounds of their approach. The cluster of buildings squatted in the widening mouth of a shallow canyon, with a shadowy background of bare hills.

Gordon went ahead of the rest, and when the peasant came yawning out of his hut, looking for the wolves he thought were frightening his property, he never saw the tigerish shadow behind him until Gordon's iron fingers shut off his wind. A threat hissed in his ear reduced him to quaking quiescence, though he ventured a wail of protest as he saw other shadowy figures saddling and leading out his beasts.

"Sahibs, I am a poor man! These beasts are not fit for great lords to ride, but they are all of my property! Allah be my witness!"

"Break his head," advised Hassan, whom pain made bloodthirsty.

But Gordon stilled their captive's weeping with a handful of gold which represented at least three times the value of his whole herd. Dazzled by this rich reward, the peasant ceased his complaints, cursed his whimpering wives and children into silence, and at Gordon's order brought forth all the food there was in his hut — leathery loaves of bread, jerked mutton, salt, and eggs. It was little enough with which to start a hard journey. Feed for the horses was slung in a bag behind each saddle, and loaded on the spare horse.

While the beasts were being saddled, Gordon, by the light of a torch held inside a shed by a disheveled woman, whittled splints, tore up a shirt for bandages, and set Hassan's arm — a sickening task, because of the swollen condition of the member. It left Hassan green-faced and gagging, yet he was able to mount with the others.

In the darkness of the small hours they rode up the pathless gorge which led into the trackless hills. Hassan was insistent on cutting the throats of the entire peasant family, but Gordon vetoed this.

"Yes, I know he'll head for the city to betray us, as soon as we get out of sight. But he'll have to go on foot, and we'll lose ourselves in

the hills before he gets there."

"There are men trained like bloodhounds in Rub el Harami," said Achmet. "They can track a wolf over bare rock."

Sunrise found them high up in the hills, out of sight of the plain, picking their way up treacherous shale-littered slopes, following dry watercourses, always careful to keep below the sky line as much as possible. Brent was already confused. They seemed lost in a labyrinth of bare hills, in which he was able to recognize general directions only by glimpses of the snow-capped peaks of the Great Range ahead.

As they rode, he studied their leader. There was nothing in Gordon's manner by which he could recognize Shirkuh the Kurd. Gone was the Kurdish accent, the boyish, reckless merry-mad swagger, the peacock vanity of dress, even the wide-legged horseman's stride. The real Gordon was almost the direct antithesis of the role he had assumed. In place of the strutting, gaudily clad, braggart youth, there was a direct, hard-eyed man, who wasted no words and about whom there was no trace of egotism or braggadocio. There was nothing of the Oriental about his countenance now, and Brent knew that the mustache alone had not accounted for the perfection of his disguise. That disguise had not depended on any mechanical device; it had been a perfection of mimicry. By no artificial means, but by completely entering into the spirit of the rôle he had assumed, Gordon had altered the expression of his face, his bearing, his whole personality. He had so marvelously portrayed a personality so utterly different from his own, that it seemed impossible that the two were one. Only the eyes were unchanged — the gleaming, untamed black eyes, reflecting a barbarism of vitality and character.

But if not garrulous, Gordon did not prove taciturn, when Brent began to ask questions.

"I was on another trail when I left Kabul," he said. "No need to take up your time with that now. I knew the Black Tigers had a new emir, but didn't know it was Jakrovitch, of course. I'd never

bothered to investigate the Black Tigers; didn't consider them important. I left Kabul alone and picked up half a dozen Afridi friends on the way. I became a Kurd after I was well on my road. That's why you lost my trail. None knew me except my Afridis.

"But before I completed my mission, word came through the hills that a Feringi with an escort of Kabuli was looking for me. News travels fast and far through the tribes. I rode back looking for you, and finally sighted you, as a prisoner. I didn't know who'd captured you, but I saw there were too many for us to fight, so I went down to parley. As soon as I saw Muhammad ez Zahir, I guessed who they were, and told them that lie about being lost in the hills and wanting to get to Rub el Harami. I signaled my men — you saw them. They were the men who fired on us as we were coming into the valley where the well was."

"But you shot one of them!"

"I shot over their heads. Just as they purposely missed us. My shots — one, pause, and then three in succession — were a signal that I was going on with the troop, and for them to return to our rendezvous on Kalat el Jehungir and wait for me. When one fell forward on his horse, it was a signal that they understood. We have an elaborate code of signals, of all kinds.

"I intended trying to get you away that night, but when you gave me Stockton's message, it changed the situation. If the new emir was Jakrovitch, I knew what it meant. Imagine India under the rule of a swine like Jakrovitch!

"I knew that Jakrovitch was after the gold in Shaitan's Cave. It couldn't be anything else. Oh, yes, I knew the custom of offering gold each year to the Devil. Stockton and I had discussed the peril to the peace of Asia if a white adventurer ever got his hands on it.

"So I knew I'd have to go to Rub el Harami. I didn't dare tell you who I was — too many men spying around all the time. When we got to the city, Fate put Alafdal Khan in my hands. A true Moslem emir is no peril to the Indian Empire. A real Oriental wouldn't touch

Shaitan's gold to save his life. I meant to make Alafdal emir. I had to tell him who I was before he'd believe I had a chance of doing it.

"I didn't premeditatedly precipitate that riot in the *suk*. I simply took advantage of it. I wanted to get you safely out of Jakrovitch's hands before I started anything, so I persuaded Alafdal Kahn that we needed you in our plot, and he put up the money to buy you. Then during the auction Jakrovitch lost his head and played into my hands. Everything would have worked out perfectly, if it hadn't been for Ali Shah and his man, that Shinwari! It was inevitable that somebody would recognize me sooner or later, but I hoped to destroy Jakrovitch, set Alafdal solidly in power, and have an avenue of escape open for you and me before that happened."

"At least Jakrovitch is dead," said Brent.

"We didn't fail there," agreed Gordon. "Ali Shah is no menace to the world. He won't touch the gold. The organization Jakrovitch built up will fall apart, leaving only the comparatively harmless core of the Black Tigers as it was before his coming. We've drawn their fangs, as far as the safety of India is concerned. All that's at stake now are our own lives — but I'll admit I'm selfish enough to want to preserve them."

VIII
The Pass of Swords

Brent beat his numbed hands together for warmth. For days they had been struggling through the trackless hills. The lean horses stumbled against the blast that roared between intervals of breathless sun blaze. The riders clung to the saddles when they could, or stumbled on afoot, leading their mounts, continually gnawed by hunger. At night they huddled together for warmth, men and beasts, in the lee of some rock or cliff, only occasionally finding wood enough to build a tiny fire.

Gordon's endurance was amazing. It was he who led the way, finding water, erasing their too obvious tracks, caring for the

mounts when the others were too exhausted to move. He gave his cloak and robe to the ragged Waziris, himself seeming impervious to the chill winds as to the blazing sun.

The pack horse died. There was little food left for the horses, less for the men. They had left the hills now and were in the higher reaches, with the peaks of the Great Range looming through the mists ahead of them. Life became a pain-tinged dream to Brent in which one scene stood out vividly. They sat their gaunt horses at the head of a long valley and saw, far back, white dots moving in the morning mists.

“They have found our trail,” muttered Alafdal Khan. “They will not quit it while we live. They have good horses and plenty of food.”

And thereafter from time to time they glimpsed, far away and below and behind them, those sinister moving dots, that slowly, slowly cut down the long lead. Gordon ceased his attempts to hide their trail, and they headed straight for the backbone of the range which rose like a rampart before them — scarecrow men on phantom horses, following a grim-faced chief.

On a midday when the sky was as clear as chilled steel, they struggled over a lofty mountain shoulder and sighted a notch that broke the chain of snow-clad summits, and beyond it, the pinnacle of a lesser, more distant peak.

“The Pass of Swords,” said Gordon. “The peak beyond it is Kalat el Jehungir, where my men are waiting for me. There will be a man sweeping the surrounding country all the time with powerful field glasses. I don’t know whether they can see smoke this far or not, but I’m going to send up a signal for them to meet us at the pass.”

Achmet climbed the mountainside with him. The others were too weak for the attempt. High up on the giddy slope they found enough green wood to make a fire that smoked. Presently, manipulated with ragged cloak, balls of thick black smoke rolled upward against the blue. It was the old Indian technique of Gordon’s

native plains, and Brent knew it was a thousand-to-one shot. Yet hillmen had eyes like hawks.

They descended the shoulder and lost sight of the pass. Then they started climbing once more, over slopes and crags and along the rims of gigantic precipices. It was on one of those ledges that Suleiman's horse stumbled and screamed and went over the edge, to smash to a pulp with its rider a thousand feet below, while the others stared helplessly.

It was at the foot of the long canyon that pitched upward toward the pass that the starving horses reached the limit of their endurance. The fugitives killed one and haggled off chunks of gristly flesh with their knives. They scorched the meat over a tiny fire, scarcely tasting it as they bolted it. Bodies and nerves were numb for rest and sleep. Brent clung to one thought — if the Afridis had seen the signal, they would be waiting at the pass, with fresh horses. On fresh horses they could escape, for the mounts of their pursuers must be nearly exhausted, too.

On foot they struggled up the steep canyon. Night fell while they struggled, but they did not halt. All through the night they drove their agonized bodies on, and at dawn they emerged from the mouth of the canyon to a broad slope that tilted up to the gap of clear sky cut in the mountain wall. It was empty. The Afridis were not there. Behind them white dots were moving inexorably up the canyon.

"We'll make our last stand at the mouth of the pass," said Gordon.

His eyes swept his phantom crew with a strange remorse. They looked like dead men. They reeled on their feet, their heads swimming with exhaustion and dizziness.

"Sorry about it all," he said. "Sorry, Brent."

"Stockton was my friend," said Brent, and then could have cursed himself, had he had the strength. It sounded so trite, so melodramatic.

“Alafdal, I’m sorry,” said Gordon. “Sorry for all you men.”

Alafdal lifted his head like a lion throwing back his mane.

“Nay, El Borak! You made a king of me. I was but a glutton and a sot, dreaming dreams I was too timid and too lazy to attempt. You gave me a moment of glory. It is worth all the rest of my life.”

Painfully they struggled up to the head of the pass. Brent crawled the last few yards, till Gordon lifted him to his feet. There in the mouth of the great corridor that ran between echoing cliffs, their hair blowing in the icy wind, they looked back the way they had come and saw their pursuers, dots no longer, but men on horses. There was a group of them within a mile, a larger cluster far back down the canyon. The toughest and best-mounted riders had drawn away from the others.

The fugitives lay behind boulders in the mouth of the pass. They had three pistols, a saber, a tulwar, and a knife between them. The riders had seen their quarry turn at bay; their rifles glinted in the early-morning light as they flogged their reeling horses up the slope. Brent recognized Ali Shah himself, his arm in a sling; Muhammad ez Zahir; the black-bearded Yusufzai captain. A group of grim warriors were at their heels. All were gaunt-faced from the long grind. They came on recklessly, firing as they came. Yet the men at bay drew first blood.

Alafdal Khan, a poor shot and knowing it, had exchanged his pistol for Achmet’s tulwar. Now Achmet sighted and fired and knocked a rider out of his saddle almost at the limit of pistol range. In his exultation he yelled and incautiously lifted his head above the boulder. A volley of rifle fire spattered the rock with splashes of hot lead, and one bullet hit Achmet between the eyes. Alafdal snatched the pistol as it fell and began firing. His eyes were bloodshot, his aim wild. But a horse fell, pinning its rider.

Above the crackling of the Luger came the doomlike crash of Gordon’s Colt. Only the toss of his horse’s head saved Ali Shah. The horse caught the bullet meant for him, and Ali Shah sprang clear as it fell, rolling to cover. The others abandoned their horses and

followed suit. They came wriggling up the slope, firing as they came, keeping to cover.

Brent realized that he was firing the other German pistol only when he heard a man scream and saw him fall across a boulder. Vaguely, then, he realized that he had killed another man. Alafdal Khan had emptied his pistol without doing much harm. Brent fired and missed, scored a hit, and missed again. His hand shook with weakness, and his eyes played him tricks. But Gordon was not missing. It seemed to Brent that every time the Colt crashed a man screamed and fell. The slope was littered with white-clad figures. They had not worn their black armor on that chase.

Perhaps the madness of the high places had entered Ali Shah's brain on that long pursuit. At any rate he would not wait for the rest of his men, plodding far behind him. Like a madman he drove his warriors to the assault. They came on, firing and dying in the teeth of Gordon's bullets till the slope was a shambles. But the survivors came grimly on, nearer and nearer, and then suddenly they had broken cover and were charging like a gust of hill wind.

Gordon missed Ali Shah with his last bullet and killed the man behind him, and then like ghosts rising from the ground on Judgment Day the fugitives rose and grappled with their pursuers.

Brent fired his last shot full into the face of a savage who rushed at him, clubbing a rifle. Death halted the man's charge, but the rifle stock fell, numbing Brent's shoulder and hurling him to the ground, and there, as he writhed vainly, he saw the brief madness of the fight that raged about him.

He saw the crippled Hassan, snarling like a wounded wolf, beaten down by a Ghilzai who stood with one foot on his neck and repeatedly drove a broken lance through his body. Squirming under the merciless heel, Hassan slashed blindly upward with El Borak's knife in his death agony, and the Ghilzai staggered drunkenly away, blood gushing from the great vein which had been severed behind his knee. He fell dying a few feet from his victim.

Brent saw Ali Shah shoot Alafdal Khan through the body as they came face to face, and Alafdal Khan, dying on his feet, split his enemy's head with one tremendous swing of his tulwar, so they fell together.

Brent saw Gordon cut down the black-bearded Yusufzai captain, and spring at Muhammad ez Zahir with a hate too primitive to accord his foe an honorable death. He parried Muhammad's tulwar and dashed his saber guard into the Afghan's face. Killing his man was not enough for his berserk rage; all his roused passion called for a dog's death for his enemy. And like a raging fury he battered the Afghan back and down with blows of the guard and hilt, refusing to honor him by striking with the blade, until Muhammad fell and lay with broken skull.

Gordon lurched about to face down the slope, the only man on his feet. He stood swaying on wide-braced feet among the dead, and shook the blood from his eyes. They were as red as flame burning on black water. He took a fresh grip on the bloody hilt of his saber, and glared at the horsemen spurring up the canyon — at bay at last, drunken with slaughter, and conscious only of the blind lust to slay and slay before he himself sank in the red welter of his last, grim fight.

Then hoofs rang loud on the rock behind him, and he wheeled, blade lifted — to check suddenly, a wild, blood-stained figure against the sunrise.

"El Borak!"

The pass was filled with shouting. Dimly Brent saw half a dozen horsemen sweep into view. He heard Gordon yell:

"Yar Ali Khan! You saw my signal after all! Give them a volley!"

The banging of their rifles filled the pass with thunder. Brent, twisting his head painfully, saw the demoralization of the Black Tigers. He saw men falling from their saddles, others spurring back down the canyon. Wearied from the long chase, disheartened by the fall of their emir, fearful of a trap, the tired men on tired horses fell back out of range.

Brent was aware of Gordon bending over him, heard him tell the tall Afridi he called Yar Ali Khan to see to the others; heard Yar Ali Khan say they were all dead. Then, as in a dream, Brent felt himself lifted into a saddle, with a man behind to hold him on. Wind blew his hair, and he realized they were galloping. The walls gave back the ring of the flying hoofs, and then they were through the pass, and galloping down the long slope beyond. He saw Gordon riding near him, on the steed of an Afridi who had mounted behind a comrade. And before Brent fainted from sheer exhaustion, he heard Gordon say:

“Let them follow us now if they will; they’ll never catch us on their worn-out nags, not in a thousand years!”

And Brent sank into the grateful oblivion of senselessness with his laughter ringing in his ears — the iron, elemental, indomitable laughter of El Borak.

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Son of the White Wolf

I
The Battle Standard

The commander of the Turkish outpost of El Ashraf was awakened before dawn by the stamp of horses and jingle of accoutrements. He sat up and shouted for his orderly. There was no response, so he rose, hurriedly jerked on his garments, and strode out of the mud hut that served as his headquarters. What he saw rendered him momentarily speechless.

His command was mounted, in full marching formation, drawn up near the railroad that it was their duty to guard. The plain to the left of the track where the tents of the troopers had stood now lay bare. The tents had been loaded on the baggage camels which stood fully packed and ready to move out. The commandant glared wildly, doubting his own senses, until his eyes rested on a flag borne by a

trooper. The waving pennant did not display the familiar crescent. The commandant turned pale.

"What does this mean?" he shouted, striding forward. His lieutenant, Osman, glanced at him inscrutably. Osman was a tall man, hard and supple as steel, with a dark keen face.

"Mutiny, *effendi,"* he replied calmly. "We are sick of this war we fight for the Germans. We are sick of Djemal Pasha and those other fools of the Council of Unity and Progress, and, incidentally, of you. So we are going into the hills to build a tribe of our own."

"Madness!" gasped the officer, tugging at his revolver. Even as he drew it, Osman shot him through the head.

The lieutenant sheathed the smoking pistol and turned to the troopers. The ranks were his to a man, won to his wild ambition under the very nose of the officer who now lay there with his brains oozing.

"Listen!" he commanded.

In the tense silence they all heard the low, deep reverberation in the west.

"British guns!" said Osman. "Battering the Turkish Empire to bits! The New Turks have failed. What Asia needs is not a new party, but a new race! There are thousands of fighting men between the Syrian coast and the Persian highlands, ready to be roused by a new word, a new prophet! The East is moving in her sleep. Ours is the duty to awaken her!

"You have all sworn to follow me into the hills. Let us return to the ways of our pagan ancestors who worshiped the White Wolf on the steppes of High Asia before they bowed to the creed of Mohammed!

"We have reached the end of the Islamic Age. We abjure Allah as a superstition fostered by an epileptic Meccan camel driver. Our people have copied Arab ways too long. But we hundred men are *Turks! We* have burned the Koran. We bow not toward Mecca, nor swear by their false Prophet. And now follow me as we planned —

to establish ourselves in a strong position in the hills and to seize Arab women for our wives."

"Our sons will be half Arab," someone protested.

"A man is the son of his father," retorted Osman. "We Turks have always looted the *harims* of the world for our women, but our sons are always Turks.

"Come! We have arms, horses, supplies. If we linger we shall be crushed with the rest of the army between the British on the coast and the Arabs the Englishman Lawrence is bringing up from the south. On to El Awad! The sword for the men — captivity for the women!"

His voice cracked like a whip as he snapped the orders that set the lines in motion. In perfect order they moved off through the lightening dawn toward the range of saw-edged hills in the distance. Behind them the air still vibrated with the distant rumble of the British artillery. Over them waved a banner that bore the head of a white wolf — the battle-standard of most ancient Turan.

II
Massacre

When Fraulein Olga von Bruckmann, known as a famous German secret agent, arrived at the tiny Arab hill-village of El Awad, it was in a drizzling rain that made the dusk a blinding curtain over the muddy town.

With her companion, an Arab named Ahmed, she rode into the muddy street, and the villagers crept from their hovels to stare in awe at the first white woman most of them had ever seen.

A few words from Ahmed and the *shaykh* salaamed and showed her to the best mud hut in the village. The horses were led away to feed and shelter, and Ahmed paused long enough to whisper to his companion:

"El Awad is friendly to the Turks. Have no fear. I shall be near, in any event."

“Try and get fresh horses,” she urged. “I must push on as soon as possible.”

“The *shaykh* swears there isn’t a horse in the village in fit condition to be ridden. He may be lying. But at any rate our own horses will be rested enough to go on by dawn. Even with fresh horses it would be useless to try to go any farther tonight. We’d lose our way among the hills, and in this region there’s always the risk of running into Lawrence’s Bedouin raiders.”

Olga knew that Ahmed knew she carried important secret documents from Baghdad to Damascus, and she knew from experience that she could trust his loyalty. Removing only her dripping cloak and riding boots, she stretched herself on the dingy blankets that served as a bed. She was worn out from the strain of the journey.

She was the first white woman ever to attempt to ride from Baghdad to Damascus. Only the protection accorded a trusted secret agent by the long arm of the German-Turkish government, and her guide’s zeal and craft, had brought her thus far in safety.

She fell asleep, thinking of the long weary miles still to be traveled, and even greater dangers, now that she had come into the region where the Arabs were fighting their Turkish masters. The Turks still held the country, that summer of 1917, but lightning-like raids flashed across the desert, blowing up trains, cutting tracks and butchering the inhabitants of isolated posts. Lawrence was leading the tribes northward, and with him was the mysterious American, *El Borak*, whose name was one to hush children.

She never knew how long she slept, but she awoke suddenly and sat up, in fright and bewilderment. The rain still beat on the roof, but there mingled with it shrieks of pain or fear, yells and the staccato crackling of rifles. She sprang up, lighted a candle and was just pulling on her boots when the door was hurled open violently.

Ahmed reeled in, his dark face livid, blood oozing through the fingers that clutched his breast.

“The village is attacked!” he cried chokingly. “Men in Turkish uniform! There must be some mistake! They know El Awad is friendly! I tried to tell their officer we are friends, but he shot me! We must get away, quick!”

A shot cracked in the open door behind him and a jet of fire spurted from the blackness. Ahmed groaned and crumpled. Olga cried out in horror, staring wide-eyed at the figure who stood before her. A tall, wiry man in Turkish uniform blocked the door. He was handsome in a dark, hawk-like way, and he eyed her in a manner that brought the blood to her cheeks.

“Why did you kill that man?” she demanded. “He was a trusted servant of your country.”

“I have no country,” he answered, moving toward her. Outside the firing was dying away and women’s voices were lifted piteously. “I go to build one, as my ancestor Osman did.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she retorted. “But unless you provide me with an escort to the nearest post, I shall report you to your superiors, and —”

He laughed wildly at her. “I have no superiors, you little fool! I am an empire builder, I tell you! I have a hundred armed men at my disposal. I’ll build a new race in these hills.” His eyes blazed as he spoke.

“You’re mad!” she exclaimed.

“Mad? It’s you who are mad not to recognize the possibilities as I have! This war is bleeding the life out of Europe. When it’s over, no matter who wins, the nations will lie prostrate. Then it will be Asia’s turn!

“If Lawrence can build up an Arab army to fight for him, then certainly I, an Ottoman, can build up a kingdom among my own peoples! Thousands of Turkish soldiers have deserted to the British. They and more will desert again to me, when they hear that a Turk is building anew the empire of ancient Turan.”

“Do what you like,” she answered, believing he had been seized by the madness that often grips men in time of war when the world seems crumbling and any wild dream looks possible. “But at least don’t interfere with my mission. If you won’t give me an escort, I’ll go on alone.”

“You’ll go with me!” he retorted, looking down at her with hot admiration.

Olga was a handsome girl, tall, slender but supple, with a wealth of unruly golden hair. She was so completely feminine that no disguise would make her look like a man, not even the voluminous robes of an Arab, so she had attempted none. She trusted instead to Ahmed’s skill to bring her safely through the desert.

“Do you hear those screams? My men are supplying themselves with wives to bear soldiers for the new empire. Yours shall be the signal honor of being the first to go into Sultan Osman’s *seraglio!”*

“You do not dare!” She snatched a pistol from her blouse.

Before she could level it he wrenched it from her with brutal strength.

“Dare!” He laughed at her vain struggles. “What do I not dare? I tell you a new empire is being born tonight! Come with me! There’s no time for love-making now. Before dawn we must be on the march for Sulayman’s Walls. The star of the White Wolf rises!”

III
The Call of Blood

The sun was not long risen over the saw-edged mountains to the east, but already the heat was glazing the cloudless sky to the hue of white-hot steel. Along the dim road that split the immensity of the desert a single shape moved. The shape grew out of the heat-hazes of the south and resolved itself into a man on a camel.

The man was no Arab. His boots and khakis, as well as the rifle-butt jutting from beneath his knee, spoke of the West. But with his dark face and hard frame he did not look out of place, even in that

fierce land. He was Francis Xavier Gordon, El Borak, whom men loved, feared or hated, according to their political complexion, from the Golden Horn to the headwaters of the Ganges.

He had ridden most of the night, but his iron frame had not yet approached the fringes of weariness. Another mile, and he sighted a yet dimmer trail straggling down from a range of hills to the east. Something was coming along this trail — a crawling something that left a broad dark smear on the hot flints.

Gordon swung his camel into the trail and a moment later bent over the man who lay there gasping stertorously. It was a young Arab, and the breast of his *abba* was soaked in blood.

"Yusef!" Gordon drew back the wet *abba*, glanced at the bared breast, then covered it again. Blood oozed steadily from a blue-rimmed bullet-hole. There was nothing he could do. Already the Arab's eyes were glazing. Gordon stared up the trail, seeing neither horse nor camel anywhere. But the dark smear stained the stones as far as he could see.

"My God, man, how far have you crawled in this condition?"

"An hour — many hours — I do not know!" panted Yusef. "I fainted and fell from the saddle. When I came to I was lying in the trail and my horse was gone. But I knew you would be coming up from the south, so I crawled — crawled! Allah, how hard are thy stones!"

Gordon set a canteen to his lips and Yusef drank noisily, then clutched Gordon's sleeve with clawing fingers.

"El Borak, I am dying and that is no great matter, but there is the matter of vengeance — not for me, *ya sidi*, but for innocent ones. You know I was on furlough to my village, El Awad. I am the only man of El Awad who fights for Arabia. The elders are friendly to the Turks. But last night the Turks burned El Awad! They marched in before midnight and the people welcomed them — while I hid in a shed.

"Then without warning they began slaying! The men of El Awad were unarmed and helpless. I slew one soldier myself. Then they

shot me and I dragged myself away — found my horse and rode to tell the tale before I died. Ah, Allah, I have tasted of perdition this night!"

"Did you recognize their officer?" asked Gordon.

"I never saw him before. They called this leader of theirs Osman Pasha. Their flag bore the head of a white wolf. I saw it by the light of the burning huts. My people cried out in vain that they were friends.

"There was a German woman and a man of Hauran who came to El Awad from the east, just at nightfall. I think they were spies. The Turks shot him and took her captive. It was all blood and madness."

"Mad indeed!" muttered Gordon. Yusef lifted himself on an elbow and groped for him, a desperate urgency in his weakening voice.

"El Borak, I fought well for the Emir Feisal, and for Lawrence *effendi*, and for you! I was at Yenbo, and Wejh, and Akaba. Never have I asked a reward! I ask now: justice and vengeance! Grant me this plea: Slay the Turkish dogs who butchered my people!"

Gordon did not hesitate.

"They shall die," he answered.

Yusef smiled fiercely, gasped: *"Allaho akbar!"* then sank back dead.

Within the hour Gordon rode eastward. The vultures that had already gathered in the sky with their grisly foreknowledge of death then flapped sullenly away from the cairn of stones he had piled over the dead man, Yusef.

Gordon's business in the north could wait. One reason for his dominance over the Orientals was the fact that in some ways his nature closely resembled theirs. He not only understood the cry for vengeance, but he sympathized with it. And he always kept his promise.

But he was puzzled. The destruction of a friendly village was not customary, even by the Turks, and certainly they would not ordinarily have mishandled their own spies. If they were deserters they were acting in an unusual manner, for most deserters made their way to Feisal. And that wolf's head banner?

Gordon knew that certain fanatics in the New Turks party were trying to erase all signs of Arab culture from their civilization. This was an impossible task, since that civilization itself was based on Arabic culture; but he had heard that in Stamboul the radicals even advocated abandoning Islam and reverting to the paganism of their ancestors. But he had never believed the tale.

The sun was sinking over the mountains of Edom when Gordon came to ruined El Awad, in a fold of the bare hills. For hours before he had marked its location by black dots dropping in the blue. That they did not rise again told him that the village was deserted except for the dead.

As he rode into the dusty street several vultures flapped heavily away. The hot sun had dried the mud, curdled the red pools in the dust. He sat in his saddle a while, staring silently.

He was no stranger to the handiwork of the Turk. He had seen much of it in the long fighting up from Jeddah on the Red Sea. But even so, he felt sick. The bodies lay in the street, headless, disemboweled, hewn asunder — bodies of children, old women and men. A red mist floated before his eyes, so that for a moment the landscape seemed to swim in blood. The slayers were gone, but they had left a plain road for him to follow.

What the signs they had left did not show him, he guessed. The slayers had loaded their female captives on baggage camels, and had gone eastward, deeper into the hills. Why they were following that road he could not guess, but he knew where it led — to the long-abandoned Walls of Sulayman, by way of the Well of Achmet.

Without hesitation he followed. He had not gone many miles before he passed more of their work — a baby, its brains oozing from its broken head. Some kidnaped woman had hidden her child

in her robes until it had been wrenched from her and brained on the rocks, before her eyes.

The country became wilder as he went. He did not halt to eat, but munched dried dates from his pouch as he rode. He did not waste time worrying over the recklessness of his action — one lone American dogging the crimson trail of a Turkish raiding party.

He had no plan; his future actions would depend on the circumstances that arose. But he had taken the death-trail and he would not turn back while he lived. He was no more foolhardy than his grandfather who single-handed trailed an Apache war-party for days through the Guadalupes and returned to the settlement on the Pecos with scalps hanging from his belt.

The sun had set and dusk was closing in when Gordon topped a ridge and looked down on the plain whereon stands the Well of Achmet with its straggling palm grove. To the right of that cluster stood the tents, horse lines and camel lines of a well-ordered force. To the left stood a hut used by travelers as a *khan*. The door was shut and a sentry stood before it. While he watched, a man came from the tents with a bowl of food which he handed in at the door.

Gordon could not see the occupant, but he believed it was the German girl of whom Yusef had spoken, though why they should imprison one of their own spies was one of the mysteries of this strange affair. He saw their flag, and could make out a splotch of white that must be the wolf's head. He saw, too, the Arab women, thirty-five or forty of them herded into a pen improvised from bales and pack-saddles. They crouched together dumbly, dazed by their misfortunes.

He had hidden his camel below the ridge, on the western slope, and he lay concealed behind a clump of stunted bushes until night had fallen. Then he slipped down the slope, circling wide to avoid the mounted patrol, which rode leisurely about the camp. He lay prone behind a boulder till it had passed, then rose and stole toward the hut. Fires twinkled in the darkness beneath the palms, and he heard the wailing of the captive women.

The sentry before the door of the hut did not see the cat-footed shadow that glided up to the rear wall. As Gordon drew close he heard voices within. They spoke in Turkish.

One window was in the back wall. Strips of wood had been fastened over it, to serve as both pane and bars. Peering between them, Gordon saw a slender girl in a travel-worn riding habit standing before a dark-faced man in a Turkish uniform. There was no insignia to show what his rank had been. The Turk played with a riding whip and his eyes gleamed with cruelty in the light of a candle on a camp table.

"What do I care for the information you bring from Baghdad?" he was demanding. "Neither Turkey nor Germany means anything to me. But it seems you fail to realize your own position. It is mine to command, yours to obey! You are my prisoner, my captive, my slave! It's time you learned what that means. And the best teacher I know is the whip!"

He fairly spat the last word at her and she paled.

"You dare not subject me to this indignity!" she whispered weakly.

Gordon knew this man must be Osman Pasha. He drew his heavy automatic from its scabbard under his armpit and aimed at the Turk's breast through the crack in the window. But even as his finger closed on the trigger he changed his mind. There was the sentry at the door, and a hundred other armed men, within hearing, whom the sound of a shot would bring on the run. He grasped the window bars and braced his legs.

"I see I must dispel your illusions," muttered Osman, moving toward the girl who cowered back until the wall stopped her. Her face was white. She had dealt with many dangerous men in her hazardous career, and she was not easily frightened. But she had never met a man like Osman. His face was a terrifying mask of cruelty; the ferocity that gloats over the agony of a weaker thing shone in his eyes.

Suddenly he had her by the hair, dragging her to him, laughing at her scream of pain. Just then Gordon ripped the strips off the window. The snapping of the wood sounded loud as a gun-shot and Osman wheeled, drawing his pistol, as Gordon came through the window.

The American hit on his feet, leveled automatic checking Osman's move. The Turk froze, his pistol lifted shoulder high, muzzle pointing at the roof. Outside the sentry called anxiously.

"Answer him!" grated Gordon below his breath. "Tell him everything is all right. And drop that gun!"

The pistol fell to the floor and the girl snatched it up.

"Come here, *Fraulein!"*

She ran to him, but in her haste she crossed the line of fire. In that fleeting moment when her body shielded his, Osman acted. He kicked the table and the candle toppled and went out, and simultaneously he dived for the floor. Gordon's pistol roared deafeningly just as the hut was plunged into darkness. The next instant the door crashed inward and the sentry bulked against the starlight, to crumple as Gordon's gun crashed again and yet again.

With a sweep of his arm Gordon found the girl and drew her toward the window. He lifted her through as if she had been a child, and climbed through after her. He did not know whether his blind slug had struck Osman or not. The man was crouching silently in the darkness, but there was no time to strike a match and see whether he was living or dead. But as they ran across the shadowy plain, they heard Osman's voice lifted in passion.

By the time they reached the crest of the ridge the girl was winded. Only Gordon's arm about her waist, half dragging, half carrying her, enabled her to make the last few yards of the steep incline. The plain below them was alive with torches and shouting men. Osman was yelling for them to run down the fugitives and his voice came faintly to them on the ridge.

"Take them alive, curse you! Scatter and find them! It's El Borak!" An instant later he was yelling with an edge of panic in his voice:

“Wait. Come back! Take cover and make ready to repel an attack! He may have a horde of Arabs with him!”

“He thinks first of his own desire, and only later of the safety of his men,” muttered Gordon. “I don’t think he’ll ever get very far. Come on.”

He led the way to the camel, helped the girl into the saddle, then leaped up himself. A word, a tap of the camel wand, and the beast ambled silently off down the slope.

“I know Osman caught you at El Awad,” said Gordon. “But what’s he up to? What’s his game?”

“He was a lieutenant stationed at El Ashraf,” she answered. “He persuaded his company to mutiny, kill their commander and desert. He plans to fortify the Walls of Sulayman, and build a new empire. I thought at first he was mad, but he isn’t. He’s a devil.”

“The Walls of Sulayman?” Gordon checked his mount and sat for a moment motionless in the starlight.

“Are you game for an all-night ride?” he asked presently.

“Anywhere! As long as it is far away from Osman!” There was a hint of hysteria in her voice.

“I doubt if your escape will change his plans. He’ll probably lie about Achmet all night under arms, expecting an attack. In the morning he will decide that I was alone, and pull out for the Walls.

“Well, I happen to know that an Arab force is there, waiting for an order from Lawrence to move on to Ageyli. Three hundred Juheina camel-riders, sworn to Feisal. Enough to eat Osman’s gang. Lawrence’s messenger should reach them some time between dawn and noon. There is a chance we can get there before the Juheina pull out. If we can, we’ll turn them on Osman and wipe him out, with his whole pack.

“It won’t upset Lawrence’s plans for the Juheina to get to Ageyli a day late, and Osman must be destroyed. He’s a mad dog running loose.”

“His ambition sounds mad,” she murmured. “But when he speaks of it, with his eyes blazing, it’s easy to believe he might even succeed.”

“You forget that crazier things have happened in the desert,” he answered, as he swung the camel eastward. “The world is being made over here, as well as in Europe. There’s no telling what damage this Osman might do, if left to himself. The Turkish Empire is falling to pieces, and new empires *have* risen out of the ruins of old ones.

“But if we can get to Sulayman before the Juheina march, we’ll check him. If we find them gone, we’ll be in a pickle ourselves. It’s a gamble, our lives against his. Are you game?”

“Till the last card falls!” she retorted. His face was a blur in the starlight, but she sensed rather than saw his grim smile of approval.

The camel’s hoofs made no sound as they dropped down the slope and circled far wide of the Turkish camp. Like ghosts on a ghost-camel they moved across the plain under the stars. A faint breeze stirred the girl’s hair. Not until the fires were dim behind them and they were again climbing a hill-road did she speak.

“I know you. You’re the American they call El Borak, the Swift. You came down from Afghanistan when the war began. You were with King Hussein even before Lawrence came over from Egypt. Do you know who I am?”

“Yes.”

“Then what’s my status?” she asked. “Have you rescued me or captured me? Am I a prisoner?”

“Let us say companion, for the time being,” he suggested. “We’re up against a common enemy. No reason why we shouldn’t make common cause, is there?”

“None!” she agreed, and leaning her blond head against his hard shoulder, she went soundly to sleep.

A gaunt moon rose, pushing back the horizons, flooding craggy slopes and dusty plains with leprous silver. The vastness of the

desert seemed to mock the tiny figures on their tiring camel, as they rode blindly on toward what Fate they could not guess.

IV
Wolves of the Desert

Olga awoke as dawn was breaking. She was cold and stiff, in spite of the cloak Gordon had wrapped about her, and she was hungry. They were riding through a dry gorge with rock-strewn slopes rising on either hand, and the camel's gait had become a lurching walk. Gordon halted it, slid off without making it kneel, and took its rope.

"It's about done, but the Walls aren't far ahead. Plenty of water there — food, too, if the Juheina are still there. There are dates in that pouch."

If he felt the strain of fatigue he did not show it as he strode along at the camel's head. Olga rubbed her chill hands and wished for sunrise.

"The Well of Harith," Gordon indicated a walled enclosure ahead of them. "The Turks built that wall, years ago, when the Walls of Sulayman were an army post. Later they abandoned both positions."

The wall, built of rocks and dried mud, was in good shape, and inside the enclosure there was a partly ruined hut. The well was shallow, with a mere trickle of water at the bottom.

"I'd better get off and walk too," Olga suggested.

"These flints would cut your boots and feet to pieces. It's not far now. Then the camel can rest all it needs."

"And if the Juheina aren't there —" She left the sentence unfinished.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe Osman won't come up before the camel's rested."

"I believe he'll make a forced march," she said, not fearfully, but calmly stating an opinion. "His beasts are good. If he drives them hard, he can get here before midnight. Our camel won't be rested

enough to carry us, by that time. And we couldn't get away on foot, in this desert."

He laughed, and respecting her courage, did not try to make light of their position.

"Well," he said quietly, "let's hope the Juheina are still there!"

If they were not, she and Gordon were caught in a trap of hostile, waterless desert, fanged with the long guns of predatory tribesmen.

Three miles further east the valley narrowed and the floor pitched upward, dotted by dry shrubs and boulders. Gordon pointed suddenly to a faint ribbon of smoke feathering up into the sky.

"Look! The Juheina are there!"

Olga gave a deep sigh of relief. Only then did she realize how desperately she had been hoping for some such sign. She felt like shaking a triumphant fist at the rocky waste about her, as if at a sentient enemy, sullen and cheated of its prey.

Another mile and they topped a ridge and saw a large enclosure surrounding a cluster of wells. There were Arabs squatting about their tiny cooking fires. As the travelers came suddenly into view within a few hundred yards of them, the Bedouins sprang up, shouting. Gordon drew his breath suddenly between clenched teeth.

"They are not Juheina! They're Rualla! Allies of the Turks!"

Too late to retreat. A hundred and fifty wild men were on their feet, glaring, rifles cocked.

Gordon did the next best thing and went leisurely toward them. To look at him one would have thought that he had expected to meet these men here, and anticipated nothing but a friendly greeting. Olga tried to imitate his tranquility, but she knew their lives hung on the crook of a trigger finger. These men were supposed to be her allies, but her recent experience made her distrust Orientals. The sight of these hundreds of wolfish faces filled her with sick dread.

They were hesitating, rifles lifted, nervous and uncertain as surprised wolves, then:

“Allah!” howled a tall, scarred warrior. “It is El Borak!”

Olga caught her breath as she saw the man’s finger quiver on his rifle-trigger. Only a racial urge to gloat over his victim kept him from shooting the American, then and there.

“El Borak!” The shout was a wave that swept the throng.

Ignoring the clamor, the menacing rifles, Gordon made the camel kneel and lifted Olga off. She tried, with fair success, to conceal her fear of the wild figures that crowded about them, but her flesh crawled at the blood-lust burning redly in each wolfish eye.

Gordon’s rifle was in its boot on the saddle, and his pistol was out of sight, under his shirt. He was careful not to reach for the rifle — a move which would have brought a hail of bullets — but having helped the girl down, he turned and faced the crowd casually, his hands empty. Running his glance over the fierce faces, he singled out a tall stately man in the rich garb of a *shaykh*, who was standing somewhat apart.

“You keep poor watch, Mitkhal ibn Ali,” said Gordon. “If I had been a raider your men would be lying in their blood by this time.”

Before the *shaykh* could answer, the man who had first recognized Gordon thrust himself violently forward, his face convulsed with hate.

“You expected to find friends here, El Borak!” he exulted. “But you come too late! Three hundred Juheina dogs rode north an hour before dawn! We saw them go, and came up after they had gone. Had they known of your coming, perhaps they would have stayed to welcome you!”

“It’s not to you I speak, Zangi Khan, you Kurdish dog,” retorted Gordon contemptuously, “but to the Rualla — honorable men and fair foes!”

Zangi Khan snarled like a wolf and threw up his rifle, but a lean Bedouin caught his arm.

“Wait!” he growled. “Let El Borak speak. His words are not wind.”

A rumble of approval came from the Arabs. Gordon had touched their fierce pride and vanity. That would not save his life, but they were willing to listen to him before they killed him.

“If you listen he will trick you with cunning words!” shouted the angered Zangi Khan furiously. “Slay him now, before he can do us harm!”

“Is Zangi Khan *shaykh* of the Rualla that he gives commands while Mitkhal stands silent?” asked Gordon with biting irony.

Mitkhal reacted to his taunt exactly as Gordon knew he would.

“Let El Borak speak!” he ordered. “I command here, Zangi Khan! Do not forget that.”

“I do not forget, *ya sidi,”* the Kurd assured him, but his eyes burned red at the rebuke. “I but spoke in zeal for your safety.”

Mitkhal gave him a slow, searching glance which told Gordon that there was no love lost between the two men. Zangi Khan’s reputation as a fighting man meant much to the younger warriors. Mitkhal was more fox than wolf, and he evidently feared the Kurd’s influence over his men. As an agent of the Turkish government Zangi’s authority was theoretically equal to Mitkhal’s. Actually this amounted to little, for Mitkhal’s tribesmen took orders from their *shaykh* only. But it put Zangi in a position to use his personal talents to gain an ascendancy — an ascendancy Mitkhal feared would relegate him to a minor position.

“Speak, El Borak,” ordered Mitkhal. “But speak swiftly. It may be,” he added, “Allah’s will that the moments of your life are few.”

“Death marches from the west,” said Gordon abruptly. “Last night a hundred Turkish deserters butchered the people of El Awad.”

“Wallah!” swore a tribesman. “El Awad was friendly to the Turks!”

“A lie!” cried Zangi Khan. “Or if true, the dogs of deserters slew the people to curry favor with Feisal.”

“When did men come to Feisal with the blood of children on their hands?” retorted Gordon. “They have foresworn Islam and worship the White Wolf. They carried off the young women and the old women, the men and the children they slew like dogs.”

A murmur of anger rose from the Arabs. The Bedouins had a rigid code of warfare, and they did not kill women or children. It was the unwritten law of the desert, old when Abraham came up out of Chaldea.

But Zangi Khan cried out in angry derision, blind to the resentful looks cast at him. He did not understand that particular phase of the Bedouins' code, for his people had no such inhibition. Kurds in war killed women as well as men.

"What are the women of El Awad to us?" he sneered.

"Your heart I know already," answered Gordon with icy contempt. "It is to the Rualla that I speak."

"A trick!" howled the Kurd. "A lie to trick us!"

"It is no lie!" Olga stepped forward boldly. "Zangi Khan, you know that I am an agent of the German government. Osman Pasha, leader of these renegades, burned El Awad last night, as El Borak has said. Osman murdered Ahmed ibn Shalaan, my guide, among others. He is as much our enemy as he is an enemy of the British."

She looked to Mitkhal for help, but the *shaykh* stood apart, like an actor watching a play in which he had not yet received his cue.

"What if it is the truth?" Zangi Khan snarled, muddled by his hate and fear of El Borak's cunning. "What is El Awad to us?"

Gordon caught him up instantly.

"This Kurd asks what is the destruction of a friendly village! Doubtless, naught to him! But what does it mean to you, who have left your herds and families unguarded? If you let this pack of mad dogs range the land, how can you be sure of the safety of your wives and children?"

"What would you have, El Borak?" demanded a grey-bearded raider.

"Trap these Turks and destroy them. I'll show you how."

It was then that Zangi Khan lost his head completely.

“Heed him not!” he screamed. “Within the hour we must ride northward! The Turks will give us ten thousand British pounds for his head!”

Avarice burned briefly in the men’s eyes, to be dimmed by the reflection that the reward offered for El Borak’s head would be claimed by the *shaykh* and Zangi. They made no move and Mitkhal stood aside with an air of watching a contest that did not concern himself.

“Take his head!” screamed Zangi, sensing hostility at last, and thrown into a panic by it.

His demoralization was completed by Gordon’s taunting laugh.

“You seem to be the only one who wants my head, Zangi! Perhaps you can take it!”

Zangi howled incoherently, his eyes glaring red, then threw up his rifle, hip-high. Just as the muzzle came up, Gordon’s automatic crashed thunderously. He had drawn so swiftly not a man there had followed his motion. Zangi Khan reeled back under the impact of hot lead, toppled sideways and lay still.

In an instant, a hundred cocked rifles covered Gordon. Confused by varying emotions, the men hesitated for the fleeting instant it took Mitkhal to shout:

“Hold! Do not shoot!”

He strode forward with the air of a man ready to take the center of the stage at last, but he could not disguise the gleam of satisfaction in his shrewd eyes.

“No man here is kin to Zangi Khan,” he said offhandedly. “There is no cause for blood feud. He had eaten the salt, but he attacked our prisoner, whom he thought unarmed.”

He held out his hand for the pistol, but Gordon did not surrender it.

“I’m not your prisoner.” said he. “I could kill you before your men could lift a finger. But I didn’t come here to fight you. I came asking

aid to avenge the children and women of my enemies. I risk my life for your families. Are you dogs, to do less?”

The question hung in the air unanswered, but he had struck the right chord in their barbaric bosoms, that were always ready to respond to some wild deed of reckless chivalry. Their eyes glowed and they looked at their *shaykh* expectantly.

Mitkhal was a shrewd politician. The butchery at El Awad meant much less to him than it meant to his younger warriors. He had associated with so-called civilized men long enough to lose much of his primitive integrity. But he always followed the side of public opinion, and was shrewd enough to lead a movement he could not check. Yet, he was not to be stampeded into a hazardous adventure.

“These Turks may be too strong for us,” he objected.

“I’ll show you how to destroy them with little risk,” answered Gordon. “But there must be covenants between us, Mitkhal.”

“These Turks must be destroyed,” said Mitkhal, and he spoke sincerely there, at least. “But there are too many blood feuds between us, El Borak, for us to let you get out of our hands.”

Gordon laughed.

“You can’t whip the Turks without my help and you know it. Ask your young men what they desire!”

“Let El Borak lead us!” shouted a young warrior instantly. A murmur of approval paid tribute to Gordon’s widespread reputation as a strategist.

“Very well!” Mitkhal took the tide. “Let there be truce between us — with conditions! Lead us against the Turks. If you win, you and the woman shall go free. If we lose, we take your head!”

Gordon nodded, and the warriors yelled in glee. It was just the sort of a bargain that appealed to their minds, and Gordon knew it was the best he could make.

“Bring bread and salt!” ordered Mitkhal, and a giant black slave moved to do his bidding. “Until the battle is lost or won there is truce between us, and no Rualla shall harm you, unless you spill Rualla blood.”

Then he thought of something else and his brow darkened as he thundered:

“Where is the man who watched from the ridge?”

A terrified youth was pushed forward. He was a member of a small tribe tributary to the more important Rualla.

“Oh, *shaykh,”* he faltered, “I was hungry and stole away to a fire for meat —”

“Dog!” Mitkhal struck him in the face. “Death is thy portion for failing in thy duty.”

“Wait!” Gordon interposed. “Would you question the will of Allah? If the boy had not deserted his post he would have seen us coming up the valley, and your men would have fired on us and killed us. Then you would not have been warned of the Turks, and would have fallen prey to them before discovering they were enemies. Let him go and give thanks to Allah Who sees all!”

It was the sort of sophistry that appeals to the Arab mind. Even Mitkhal was impressed.

“Who knows the mind of Allah?” he conceded. “Live, Musa, but next time perform the will of Allah with vigilance and a mind to orders. And now, El Borak, let us discuss battle-plans while food is prepared.”

V

Treachery

It was not yet noon when Gordon halted the Rualla beside the Well of Harith. Scouts sent westward reported no sign of the Turks, and the Arabs went forward with the plans made before leaving the Walls — plans outlined by Gordon and agreed to by Mitkhal. First the tribesmen began gathering rocks and hurling them into the well.

“The water’s still beneath,” Gordon remarked to Olga. “But it’ll take hours of hard work to clean out the well so that anybody can get to it. The Turks can’t do it under our rifles. If we win, we’ll clean it out ourselves, so the next travelers won’t suffer.”

“Why not take refuge in the *sangar* ourselves?” she asked.

“Too much of a trap. That’s what we’re using it for. We’d have no chance with them in open fight, and if we laid an ambush out in the valley, they’d simply fight their way through us. But when a man’s shot at in the open, his first instinct is to make for the nearest cover.

So I'm hoping to trick them into going into the *sangar*. Then we'll bottle them up and pick them off at our leisure. Without water they can't hold out long. We shouldn't lose a dozen men, if any."

"It seems strange to see you solicitous about the lives of these Rualla, who are your enemies, after all," she laughed.

"Instinct, maybe. No man fit to lead men wants to lose any more of them than he can help. Just now these men are my allies, and it's up to me to protect them as well as I can. I'll admit I'd rather be fighting with the Juheina. Feisal's messenger must have started for the Walls hours before I supposed he would."

"And if the Turks surrender, what then?"

"I'll try to get them to Lawrence — all but Osman Pasha." Gordon's face darkened. "That man hangs if he falls into my hands."

"How will you get them to Lawrence? The Rualla won't take them."

"I haven't the slightest idea. But let's catch our hare before we start broiling him. Osman may whip the daylights out of us."

"It means your head if he does," she warned, with a shudder.

"Well, it's worth ten thousand pounds to the Turks," he laughed, and he moved to inspect the partly ruined hut. Olga followed him.

Mitkhal, directing the blocking of the well, glanced sharply at them, then noted that a number of men were between them and the gate, and turned back to his overseeing.

"*Hsss*, El Borak!" It was a tense whisper, just as Gordon and Olga turned to leave the hut. An instant later they located a tousled head thrust up from behind a heap of rubble. It was the boy Musa, who obviously had slipped into the hut through a crevice in the back wall.

"Watch from the door and warn me if you see anybody coming," Gordon muttered to Olga. "This lad must have something to tell."

"I have, *effendi!"* The boy was trembling with excitement. "I overheard the *shaykh* talking secretly to his black slave, Hassan. I saw them walk away among the palms while you and the woman

were eating, at the Walls, and I crept after them, for I feared they meant you mischief — and you saved my life.

"El Borak, listen! Mitkhal means to slay you, whether you win this battle for him or not! He was glad you slew the Kurd, and he is glad to have your aid in wiping out these Turks. But he lusts for the gold the other Turks will pay for your head. Yet he dares not break his word and the covenant of the salt openly. So, if we win the battle, Hassan is to shoot you, and swear you fell by a Turkish bullet!"

The boy rushed on with his story:

"Then Mitkhal will say to the people: 'El Borak was our guest and ate our salt. But now he is dead, through no fault of ours, and there is no use wasting the reward. So, we will take off his head and take it to Damascus and the Turks will give us ten thousand pounds.'"

Gordon smiled grimly at Olga's horror. That was typical Arab logic.

"It didn't occur to Mitkhal that Hassan might miss his first shot and not get a chance to shoot again, I suppose?" he suggested.

"Oh, yes, *effendi*, Mitkhal thinks of everything. If you kill Hassan, Mitkhal will swear you broke the covenant yourself, by spilling the blood of a Rualla, or a Rualla's servant, which is the same thing, and will feel free to order you beheaded."

There was genuine humor in Gordon's laugh.

"Thanks, Musa! If I saved your life, you've paid me back. Better get out now, before somebody sees you talking to us."

"What shall we do?" exclaimed Olga, pale to the lips.

"You're in no danger," he assured her.

She colored angrily.

"I wasn't thinking of that! Do you think I have less gratitude than that Arab boy? That *shaykh* means to murder you, don't you understand? Let's steal camels and run for it!"

“Run where? If we did, they’d be on our heels in no time, deciding I’d lied to them about everything. Anyway, we wouldn’t have a chance. They’re watching us too closely. Besides, I wouldn’t run if could. I started to wipe out Osman Pasha, and this is the best chance I see to do it. Come on. Let’s get out in the *sangar* before Mitkhal gets suspicious.”

As soon as the well was blocked the men retired to the hillsides. Their camels were hidden behind the ridges, and the men crouched behind rocks and among the stunted shrubs along the slopes. Olga refused Gordon’s offer to send her with an escort back to the Walls, and stayed with him taking up a position behind a rock, Osman’s pistol in her belt. They lay flat on the ground and the heat of the sun-baked flints seeped through their garments.

Once she turned her head, and shuddered to see the blank black countenance of Hassan regarding them from some bushes a few yards behind them. The black slave, who knew no law but his master’s command, was determined not to let Gordon out of his sight.

She spoke of this in a low whisper to the American.

“Sure,” he murmured. “I saw him. But he won’t shoot till he knows which way the fight’s going, and is sure none of the men are looking.”

Olga’s flesh crawled in anticipation of more horrors. If they lost the fight the enraged Ruallas would tear Gordon to pieces, supposing he survived the encounter. If they won, his reward would be a treacherous bullet in the back.

The hours dragged slowly by. Not a flutter of cloth, no lifting of an impatient head betrayed the presence of the wild men on the slopes. Olga began to feel her nerves quiver. Doubts and forebodings gnawed maddeningly at her.

“We took position too soon! The men will lose patience. Osman can’t get here before midnight. It took us all night to reach the Well.”

“Bedouins never lose patience when they smell loot,” he answered. “I believe Osman will get here before sundown. We made poor time on a tiring camel for the last few hours of that ride. I believe Osman broke camp before dawn and pushed hard.”

Another thought came to torture her.

“Suppose he doesn’t come at all? Suppose he has changed his plans and gone somewhere else? The Rualla will believe you lied to them!”

“Look!”

The sun hung low in the west, a fiery, dazzling ball. She blinked, shading her eyes.

Then the head of a marching column grew out of the dancing heat-waves: lines of horsemen, grey with dust, files of heavily-laden baggage camels, with the captive women riding them. The standard hung loose in the breathless air; but once, when a vagrant gust of wind, hot as the breath of perdition, lifted the folds, the white wolf’s head was displayed.

Crushing proof of idolatry and heresy! In their agitation, the Rualla almost betrayed themselves. Even Mitkhal turned pale.

“Allah! Sacrilege! Forgotten of God. Hell shall be thy portion!”

“Easy!” hissed Gordon, feeling the semi-hysteria that ran down the lurking lines. “Wait for my signal. They may halt to water their camels at the Well.”

Osman must have driven his people like a fiend all day. The women drooped on the loaded camels; the dust-caked faces of the soldiers were drawn. The horses reeled with weariness. But it was soon evident that they did not intend halting at the Well with their goal, the Walls of Sulayman, so near. The head of the column was even with the *sangar* when Gordon fired. He was aiming at Osman, but the range was long, the sun-glare on the rocks dazzling. The man behind Osman fell, and at the signal the slopes came alive with spurting flame.

The column staggered. Horses and men went down and stunned soldiers gave back a ragged fire that did no harm. They did not even see their assailants save as bits of white cloth bobbing among the boulders.

Perhaps discipline had grown lax during the grind of that merciless march. Perhaps panic seized the tired Turks. At any rate the column broke and men fled toward the *sangar* without waiting for orders. They would have abandoned the baggage camels had not Osman ridden among them. Cursing and striking with the flat of his saber, he made them drive the beasts in with them.

"I hoped they'd leave the camels and women outside," grunted Gordon. "Maybe they'll drive them out when they find there's no water."

The Turks took their positions in good order, dismounting and ranging along the wall. Some dragged the Arab women off the camels and drove them into the hut. Others improvised a pen for the animals with stakes and ropes between the back of the hut and the wall. Saddles were piled in the gate to complete the barricade.

The Arabs yelled taunts as they poured in a hail of lead, and a few leaped up and danced derisively, waving their rifles. But they stopped that when a Turk drilled one of them cleanly through the head. When the demonstrations ceased, the besiegers offered scanty targets to shoot at.

However, the Turks fired back frugally and with no indication of panic, now that they were under cover and fighting the sort of a fight they understood. They were well protected by the wall from the men directly in front of them, but those facing north could be seen by the men on the south ridge, and vice versa. But the distance was too great for consistently effective shooting at these marks by the Arabs.

"We don't seem to be doing much damage," remarked Olga presently.

"Thirst will win for us," Gordon answered. "All we've got to do is to keep them bottled up. They probably have enough water in their

canteens to last through the rest of the day. Certainly no longer. Look, they're going to the well now."

The well stood in the middle of the enclosure, in a comparatively exposed area, as seen from above. Olga saw men approaching it with canteens in their hands, and the Arabs, with sardonic enjoyment, refrained from firing at them. They reached the well, and then the girl saw the change that came over them. It ran through their band like an electric shock. The men along the walls reacted by firing wildly. A furious yelling rose, edged with hysteria, and men began to run madly about the enclosure. Some toppled, hit by shots dropping from the ridges.

"What are they doing?" Olga started to her knees, and was instantly jerked down again by Gordon. The Turks were running into the hut. If she had been watching Gordon she would have sensed the meaning of it, for his dark face grew suddenly grim.

"They're dragging the women out!" she exclaimed. "I see Osman waving his saber. What? Oh, God! They're butchering the women!"

Above the crackle of shots rose terrible shrieks and the sickening *chack* of savagely driven blows. Olga turned sick and hid her face. Osman had realized the trap into which he had been driven, and his reaction was that of a mad dog. Recognizing defeat in the blocked well, facing the ruin of his crazy ambitions by thirst and Bedouin bullets, he was taking this vengeance on the whole Arab race.

On all sides the Arabs rose howling, driven to frenzy by the sight of that slaughter. That these women were of another tribe made no difference. A stern chivalry was the foundation of their society, just as it was among the frontiersmen of early America. There was no sentimentalism about it. It was real and vital as life itself.

The Rualla went berserk when they saw women of their race falling under the swords of the Turks. A wild yell shattered the brazen sky, and recklessly breaking cover, the Arabs pelted down the slopes, howling like fiends. Gordon could not check them, nor could Mitkhal. Their shouts fell on deaf ears. The walls vomited smoke and flame as withering volleys raked the oncoming hordes.

Dozens fell, but enough were left to reach the wall and sweep over it in a wave that neither lead nor steel could halt.

And Gordon was among them. When he saw he could not stop the storm he joined it. Mitkhal was not far behind him, cursing his men as he ran. The *shaykh* had no stomach for this kind of fighting, but his leadership was at stake. No man who hung back in this charge would ever be able to command the Rualla again.

Gordon was among the first to reach the wall, leaping over the writhing bodies of half a dozen Arabs. He had not blazed away wildly as he ran like the Bedouins, to reach the wall with an empty gun. He held his fire until the flame spurts from the barrier were almost burning his face, and then emptied his rifle in a point-blank fusilade that left a bloody gap where there had been a line of fierce dark faces an instant before. Before the gap could be closed he had swarmed over and in, and the Rualla poured after him.

As his feet hit the ground a rush of men knocked him against the wall and a blade, thrusting for his life, broke against the rocks. He drove his shortened butt into a snarling face, splintering teeth and bones, and the next instant a surge of his own men over the wall cleared a space about him. He threw away his broken rifle and drew his pistol.

The Turks had been forced back from the wall in a dozen places now, and men were fighting all over the *sangar*. No quarter was asked — none given. The pitiful headless bodies sprawled before the blood-stained hut had turned the Bedouins into hot-eyed demons. The guns were empty now, all but Gordon's automatic. The yells had died down to grunts, punctuated by death-howls. Above these sounds rose the chopping impact of flailing blades, the crunch of fiercely driven rifle butts. So grimly had the Bedouins suffered in that brainless rush, that now they were outnumbered, and the Turks fought with the fury of desperation.

It was Gordon's automatic, perhaps, that tipped the balance. He emptied it without haste and without hesitation, and at that range

he could not miss. He was aware of a dark shadow forever behind him, and turned once to see black Hassan following him, smiting methodically right and left with a heavy scimitar already dripping crimson. Even in the fury of strife, Gordon grinned. The literal-minded Soudanese was obeying instructions to keep at El Borak's heels. As long as the battle hung in doubt, he was Gordon's protector — ready to become his executioner the instant the tide turned in their favor.

"Faithful servant," called Gordon sardonically. "Have care lest these Turks cheat you of my head!"

Hassan grinned, speechless. Suddenly blood burst from his thick lips and he buckled at the knees. Somewhere in that rush down the hill his black body had stopped a bullet. As he struggled on all fours a Turk ran in from the side and brained him with a rifle-butt. Gordon killed the Turk with his last bullet. He felt no grudge against Hassan. The man had been a good soldier, and had obeyed orders given him.

The *sangar* was a shambles. The men on their feet were less than those on the ground, and all were streaming blood. The white wolf standard had been torn from its staff and lay trampled under vengeful feet. Gordon bent, picked up a saber and looked about for Osman. He saw Mitkhal, running toward the horse-pen, and then he yelled a warning, for he saw Osman.

The man broke away from a group of struggling figures and ran for the pen. He tore away the ropes and the horses, frantic from the noise and smell of blood, stampeded into the *sangar*, knocking men down and trampling them. As they thundered past, Osman, with a magnificent display of agility, caught a handful of flying mane and leaped on the back of the racing steed.

Mitkhal ran toward him, yelling furiously, and snapping a pistol at him. The *shaykh*, in the confusion of the fighting, did not seem to be aware that the gun was empty, for he pulled the trigger again and again as he stood in the path of the oncoming rider. Only at the last moment did he realize his peril and leap back. Even so, he

would have sprung clear had not his sandal heel caught in a dead man's *abba*.

Mitkhal stumbled, avoided the lashing hoofs, but not the down-flailing saber in Osman's hand. A wild cry went up from the Rualla as Mitkhal fell, his turban suddenly crimson. The next instant Osman was out of the gate and riding like the wind — straight up the hillside to where he saw the slim figure of the girl to whom he now attributed his overthrow.

Olga had come out from behind the rocks and was standing in stunned horror watching the fight below. Now she awoke suddenly to her own peril at the sight of the madman charging up the slope. She drew the pistol Gordon had taken from him and opened fire. She was not a very good shot. Three bullets missed, the fourth killed the horse, and then the gun jammed. Gordon was running up the slope as the Apaches of his native Southwest run, and behind him streamed a swarm of Rualla. There was not a loaded gun in the whole horde.

Osman took a shocking fall when his horse turned a somersault under him, but rose, bruised and bloody, with Gordon still some distance away. But the Turk had to play hide-and-seek for a few moments among the rocks with his prey before he was able to grasp her hair and twist her screaming to her knees, and then he paused an instant to enjoy her despair and terror. That pause was his undoing.

As he lifted his saber to strike off her head, steel clanged loud on steel. A numbing shock ran through his arm, and his blade was knocked from his hand. His weapon rang on the hot flints. He whirled to face the blazing slits that were El Borak's eyes. The muscles stood out in cords and ridges on Gordon's sun-burnt forearm in the intensity of his passion.

"Pick it up, you filthy dog," he said between his teeth.

Osman hesitated, stooped, caught up the saber and slashed at Gordon's legs without straightening. Gordon leaped back, then sprang in again the instant his toes touched the earth. His return

was as paralyzingly quick as the death-leap of a wolf. It caught Osman off balance, his sword extended. Gordon's blade hissed as it cut the air, slicing through flesh, gritting through bone.

The Turk's head toppled from the severed neck and fell at Gordon's feet, the headless body collapsing in a heap. With an excess spasm of hate, Gordon kicked the head savagely down the slope.

"Oh!" Olga turned away and hid her face. But the girl knew that Osman deserved any fate that could have overtaken him. Presently she was aware of Gordon's hand resting lightly on her shoulder and she looked up, ashamed of her weakness. The sun was just dipping below the western ridges. Musa came limping up the slope, blood-stained but radiant.

"The dogs are all dead, *effendi!"* he cried, industriously shaking a plundered watch, in an effort to make it run. "Such of our warriors as still live are faint from strife, and many sorely wounded. There is none to command now but thou."

"Sometimes problems settle themselves," mused Gordon. "But at a ghastly price. If the Rualla hadn't made that rush, which was the death of Hassan and Mitkhal — oh, well, such things are in the hands of Allah, as the Arabs say. A hundred better men than I have died today, but by the decree of some blind Fate, I live."

Gordon looked down on the wounded men. He turned to Musa.

"We must load the wounded on camels," he said, "and take them to the camp at the Walls where there's water and shade. Come."

As they started down the slope he said to Olga:

"I'll have to stay with them till they're settled at the Walls, then I must start for the coast. Some of the Rualla will be able to ride, though, and you need have no fear of them. They'll escort you to the nearest Turkish outpost."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Then I'm not your prisoner?"

He laughed.

“I think you can help Feisal more by carrying out your original instructions of supplying misleading information to the Turks! I don’t blame you for not confiding even in me. You have my deepest admiration, for you’re playing the most dangerous game a woman can.”

“Oh!” She felt a sudden warm flood of relief and gladness that he should know she was not really an enemy. Musa was well out of earshot. “I might have known you were high enough in Feisal’s councils to know that I really am —”

“Gloria Willoughby, the cleverest, most daring secret agent the British government employs,” he murmured. The girl impulsively placed her slender fingers in his, and hand in hand they went down the slope together.

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Kirby O'Donnell

Gold from Tatary
Swords of Shahrazar
The Trail of the Blood-Stained God

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Gold from Tatary

I
Key to the Treasure

It was not mere impulsiveness that sent Kirby O'Donnell into the welter of writhing limbs and whickering blades that loomed so suddenly in the semidarkness ahead of him. In that dark alley of Forbidden Shahrazar it was no light act to plunge headlong into a nameless brawl; and O'Donnell, for all his Irish love of a fight, was not disposed thoughtlessly to jeopardize his secret mission.

But the glimpse of a scarred, bearded face swept from his mind all thought and emotion save a crimson wave of fury. He acted instinctively.

Full into the midst of the flailing group, half-seen by the light of a distant cresset, O'Donnell leaped, *kindhjal* in hand. He was dimly aware that one man was fighting three or four others, but all his attention was fixed on a single tall gaunt form, dim in the shadows. His long, narrow, curved blade licked venomously at this figure,

ploughing through cloth, bringing a yelp as the edge sliced skin. Something crashed down on O'Donnell's head, gun butt or bludgeon, and he reeled, his eyes full of sparks, and closed with someone he could not see.

His groping hand locked on a chain that encircled a bull neck, and with a straining gasp he ripped upward and felt his keen *kindhjal* slice through cloth, skin and belly muscles. An agonized groan burst from his victim's lips, and blood gushed sickeningly over O'Donnell's hand.

Through a blur of clearing sight, the American saw a broad bearded face falling away from him — not the face he had seen before. The next instant he had leaped clear of the dying man, and was slashing at the shadowy forms about him. An instant of flickering steel, and then the figures were running fleetly up the alley. O'Donnell, springing in pursuit, his hot blood lashed to murderous fury, tripped over a writhing form and fell headlong. He rose, cursing, and was aware of a man near him, panting heavily. A tall man, with a long curved blade in hand. Three forms lay in the mud of the alley.

"Come, my friend, whoever you are!" the tall man panted in *Turki*. "They have fled, but they will return with others. Let us go!"

O'Donnell made no reply. Temporarily accepting the alliance into which chance had cast him, he followed the tall stranger who ran down the winding alley with the sure foot of familiarity. Silence held them until they emerged from a low dark arch, where a tangle of alleys debouched upon a broad square, vaguely lighted by small fires about which groups of turbaned men squabbled and brewed tea. A reek of unwashed bodies mingled with the odors of horses and camels. None noticed the two men standing in the shadow made by the angle of the mud wall.

O'Donnell looked at the stranger, seeing a tall slim man with thin dark features. Under his *khalat* which was draggled and darkly splashed, showed the silver-heeled boots of a horseman. His turban

was awry, and though he had sheathed his scimitar, blood clotted the hilt and the scabbard mouth.

The keen black eyes took in every detail of the American's appearance, but O'Donnell did not flinch. His disguise had stood the test too many times for him to doubt its effectiveness.

The American was somewhat above medium height, leanly built, but with broad shoulders and corded sinews which gave him a strength out of all proportion to his weight. He was a hard-woven mass of wiry muscles and steel string nerves, combining the wolf-trap coordination of a natural fighter with a berserk fury resulting from an overflowing nervous energy. The *kindhjal* in his girdle and the scimitar at his hip were as much a part of him as his hands.

He wore the Kurdish boots, vest and girdled *khalat* like a man born to them. His keen features, burned to bronze by desert suns, were almost as dark as those of his companion.

"Tell me thy name," requested the other. "I owe my life to thee."

"I am Ali el Ghazi, a Kurd," answered O'Donnell.

No hint of suspicion shadowed the other's countenance. Under the coiffed Arab *kafiyeh* O'Donnell's eyes blazed lambent blue, but blue eyes were not at all unknown among the warriors of the Iranian highlands.

The Turk lightly and swiftly touched the hawk-headed pommel of O'Donnell's scimitar.

“I will not forget,” he promised. “I will know thee wherever we meet again. Now it were best we separated and went far from this spot, for men with knives will be seeking me — and thou too, for aiding me.” And like a shadow he glided among the camels and bales and was gone.

O’Donnell stood silently for an instant, one ear cocked back toward the alley, the other absently taking in the sounds of the night. Somewhere a thin wailing voice sang to a twanging native lute.

Somewhere else a feline-like burst of profanity marked the progress of a quarrel. O'Donnell breathed deep with contentment, despite the grim Hooded Figure that stalked forever at his shoulder, and the recent rage that still seethed in his veins. This was the real heart of the East, the East which had long ago stolen his heart and led him to wander afar from his own people.

He realized that he still gripped something in his left hand, and he lifted it to the flickering light of a nearby fire. It was a length of gold chain, one of its massy links twisted and broken. From it depended a curious plaque of beaten gold, somewhat larger than a silver dollar, but oval rather than round. There was no ornament, only a boldly carven inscription which O'Donnell, with all his Eastern lore, could not decipher.

He knew that he had torn the chain from the neck of the man he had killed in that black alley, but he had no idea as to its meaning. Slipping it into his broad girdle, he strode across the square, walking with the swagger of a nomadic horseman that was so natural to him.

Leaving the square he strode down a narrow street, the overhanging balconies of which almost touched one another. It was not late. Merchants in flowing silk robes sat cross-legged before their booths, extolling the quality of their goods — Mosul silk, matchlocks from Herat, edged weapons from India, and seed pearls from Baluchistan. Hawk-like Afghans and weapon-girdled Uzbeks jostled him. Lights streamed through silk-covered windows overhead, and the light silvery laughter of women rose above the noise of barter and dispute.

There was a tingle in the realization that he, Kirby O'Donnell, was the first Westerner ever to set foot in Forbidden Shahrazar, tucked away in a nameless valley not many days' journey from where the Afghan mountains swept down into the steppes of the Turkomans. As a wandering Kurd, traveling with a caravan from Kabul he had

come, staking his life against the golden lure of a treasure beyond men's dreams.

In the bazaars and *serais* he had heard a tale: To Shaibar Khan, the Uzbek chief who had made himself master of Shahrazar, the city had given up its ancient secret. The Uzbek had found the treasure hidden there so long ago by Muhammad Shah, king of Khuwarezm, the Land of the Throne of Gold, when his empire fell before the Mongols.

O'Donnell was in Shahrazar to steal that treasure; and he did not change his plans because of the bearded face he had recognized in the alley — the face of an old and hated enemy: Yar Akbar the Afridi, traitor and murderer.

O'Donnell turned from the street and entered a narrow arched gate which stood open as if in invitation. A narrow stair went up from a small court to a balcony. This he mounted, guided by the tinkle of a guitar and a plaintive voice singing in *Pushtu*.

He entered a room whose latticed casement overhung the street, and the singer ceased her song to greet him and make half-mocking salaam with a lithe flexing of supple limbs. He replied, and deposited himself on a divan. The furnishings of the room were not elaborate, but they were costly. The garments of the woman who watched interestedly were of silk, her satin vest sewn with seed pearls. Her dark eyes, over the filmy *yasmaq*, were lustrous and expressive, the eyes of a Persian.

"Would my lord have food — and wine?" she inquired; and O'Donnell signified assent with the lordly gesture of a Kurdish swashbuckler who is careful not to seem too courteous to any woman, however famed in intrigue she may be. He had come there not for food and drink, but because he had heard in the bazaars that news of many kinds blew on the winds through the house of Ayisha, where men from far and near came to drink her wine and listen to her songs.

She served him, and, sinking down on cushions near him, watched him eat and drink. O'Donnell's appetite was not feigned. Many lean days had taught him to eat when and where he could. Ayisha seemed to him more like a curious child than an intriguing woman, evincing so much interest over a wandering Kurd, but he knew that she was weighing him carefully behind her guileless stare, as she weighed all men who came into her house.

In that hot-bed of plot and ambitions, the wandering stranger today might be the Amir of Afghanistan or the Shah of Persia tomorrow — or the morrow might see his headless body dangling as a feast for the birds.

"You have a good sword," said she. He involuntarily touched the hilt. It was an Arab blade, long, lean, curved like the crescent moon, with a brass hawk's head for a pommel.

"It has cut many a Turkoman out of the saddle," he boasted, with his mouth full, carrying out his character. Yet it was no empty boast.

"Hai!" She believed him and was impressed. She rested her chin on her small fists and gazed up at him, as if his dark, hawk-like face had caught her fancy.

"The Khan needs swords like yours," she said.

"The Khan has many swords," he retorted, gulping wine loudly.

"No more than he will need if Orkhan Bahadur comes against him," she prophesied.

"I have heard of this Orkhan," he replied. And so he had; who in Central Asia had not heard of the daring and valorous Turkoman chief who defied the power of Moscow and had cut to pieces a Russian expedition sent to subdue him? "In the bazaars they say the Khan fears him."

That was a blind venture. Men did not speak of Shaibar Khan's fears openly.

Ayisha laughed. “Who does the Khan fear? Once the Amir sent troops to take Shahrazar, and those who lived were glad to flee! Yet if any man lives who could storm the city, Orkhan Bahadur is that man. Only tonight the Uzbeks were hunting his spies through the alleys.”

O’Donnell remembered the Turkish accent of the stranger he had unwittingly aided. It was quite possible that the man was a Turkoman spy.

As he pondered this, Ayisha’s sharp eyes discovered the broken end of the gold chain dangling from his girdle, and with a gurgle of delight she snatched it forth before he could stop her. Then with a squeal she dropped it as if it were hot, and prostrated herself in wriggling abasement among the cushions.

He scowled and picked up the trinket.

“Woman, what are you about?” he demanded.

“Your pardon, lord!” She clasped her hands, but her fear seemed more feigned than real; her eyes sparkled. “I did not know it was the token. *Aie*, you have been making game of me — asking me things none could know better than yourself. Which of the Twelve are you?”

“You babble as bees hum!” He scowled, dangling the pendant before her eyes. “You speak as one of knowledge, when, by Allah, you know not the meaning of this thing.”

“Nay, but I do!” she protested. “I have seen such emblems before on the breasts of the *emirs* of the Inner Chamber. I know that it is a *talsmin* greater than the seal of the Amir, and the wearer comes and goes at will in or out of the Shining Palace.”

“But why, wench, why?” he growled impatiently.

“Nay, I will whisper what you know so well,” she answered, kneeling beside him. Her breath came soft as the sighing of the distant night wind. “It is the symbol of a Guardian of the Treasure!”

She fell away from him laughing. “Have I not spoken truly?”

He did not at once reply. His brain was dizzy, the blood pounding madly in his veins.

“Say nothing of this,” he said at last, rising. “Your life upon it.” And casting her a handful of coins at random, he hurried down the stair and into the street. He realized that his departure was too abrupt, but he was too dizzy, with the realization of what had fallen into his hands, for an entirely placid course of action.

The treasure! In his hand he held what well might be the key to it — at least a key into the palace, to gain entrance into which he had racked his brain in vain ever since coming to Shahrazar. His visit to Ayisha had borne fruit beyond his wildest dreams.

II
The Unholy Plan

Doubtless in Muhammad Shah’s day the Shining Palace deserved its name; even now it preserved some of its former splendor. It was

separated from the rest of the city by a thick wall, and at the great gate there always stood a guard of Uzbeks with Lee-Enfield rifles, and girdles bristling with knives and pistols.

Shaibar Khan had an almost superstitious terror of accidental gunfire, and would allow only edged weapons to be brought into the palace. But his warriors were armed with the best rifles that could be smuggled into the Hills.

There was a limit to O'Donnell's audacity. There might be men on guard at the main gates who knew by sight all the *emirs* of the symbol. He made his way to a small side gate, through a loop-hole in which, at his imperious call, there peered a black man with the wizened features of a mute. O'Donnell had fastened the broken links together and the chain now looped his corded neck. He indicated the plaque which rested on the silk of his *khalat;* and with a deep salaam, the black man opened the gate.

O'Donnell drew a deep breath. He was in the heart of the lion's lair now, and he dared not hesitate or pause to deliberate. He found himself in a garden which gave on to an open court surrounded by arches supported on marble pillars. He crossed the court, meeting no one. On the opposite side a grim-looking Uzbek, leaning on a spear, scanned him narrowly but said nothing. O'Donnell's skin crawled as he strode past the somber warrior, but the man merely stared curiously at the gold oval gleaming against the Kurdish vest.

O'Donnell found himself in a corridor whose walls were decorated by a gold frieze, and he went boldly on, seeing only soft-footed slaves who took no heed of him. As he passed into another corridor, broader and hung with velvet tapestries, his heart leaped into his mouth.

It was a tall slender man in long fur-trimmed robes and a silk turban who glided from an arched doorway and halted him. The man had the pale oval face of a Persian, with a black pointed beard, and dark shadowed eyes. As with the others his gaze sought first the *talsmin*

on O'Donnell's breast — the token, undoubtedly, of a servitor beyond suspicion.

"Come with me!" snapped the Persian. "I have work for you." And vouchsafing no further enlightenment, he stalked down the corridor as if expecting O'Donnell to follow without question; which, indeed, the American did, believing that such would have been the action of the genuine Guardian of the Treasure. He knew this Persian was Ahmed Pasha, Shaibar Khan's vizir; he had seen him riding along the streets with the royal house troops.

The Persian led the way into a small domed chamber, without windows, the walls hung with thick tapestries. A small bronze lamp lighted it dimly. Ahmed Pasha drew aside the hangings, directly behind a heap of cushions, and disclosed a hidden alcove.

"Stand there with drawn sword," he directed. Then he hesitated. "Can you speak or understand any Frankish tongue?" he demanded. The false Kurd shook his head.

"Good!" snapped Ahmed Pasha. "You are here to watch, not to listen. Our lord does not trust the man he is to meet here — alone. You are stationed behind the spot where this man will sit. Watch him like a hawk. If he makes a move against the Khan, cleave his skull. If harm comes to our prince, you shall be flayed alive." He paused, glared an instant, then snarled:

"And hide that emblem, fool! Shall the whole world know you are an *emir* of the Treasure?"

"Hearkening and obedience, *ya khawand,"* mumbled O'Donnell, thrusting the symbol inside his garments. Ahmed jerked the tapestries together, and left the chamber. O'Donnell glanced through a tiny opening, waiting for the soft pad of the vizir's steps to fade away before he should glide out and take up again his hunt for the treasure.

But before he could move, there was a low mutter of voices, and two men entered the chamber from opposite sides. One bowed low

and did not venture to seat himself until the other had deposited his fat body on the cushions, and indicated permission.

O'Donnell knew that he looked on Shaibar Khan, once the terror of the Kirghiz steppes, and now lord of Shahrazar. The Uzbek had the broad powerful build of his race, but his thick limbs were soft from easy living. His eyes held some of their old restless fire, but the muscles of his face seemed flabby, and his features were lined and purpled with debauchery. And there seemed something else — a worried, haunted look, strange in that son of reckless nomads. O'Donnell wondered if the possession of the treasure was weighing on his mind.

The other man was slender, dark, his garments plain beside the gorgeous ermine-trimmed *kaftan*, pearl-sewn girdle and green, emerald-crested turban of the Khan.

This stranger plunged at once into conversation, low-voiced but animated and urgent. He did most of the talking, while Shaibar Khan listened, occasionally interjecting a question, or a grunt of gratification. The Khan's weary eyes began to blaze, and his pudgy hands knotted as if they gripped again the hilt of the blade which had carved his way to power.

And Kirby O'Donnell forgot to curse the luck which held him prisoner while precious time drifted by. Both men spoke a tongue the American had not heard in years — a European language. And scanning closely the slim dark stranger, O'Donnell admitted himself baffled. If the man were, as he suspected, a European disguised as an Oriental, then O'Donnell knew he had met his equal in masquerade.

For it was European politics he talked, European politics that lay behind the intrigues of the East. He spoke of war and conquest, and vast hordes rolling down the Khyber Pass into India; to complete the overthrow, said the dark slender man, of a rule outworn.

He promised power and honors to Shaibar Khan, and O'Donnell, listening, realized that the Uzbek was but a pawn in his game, no

less than those others he mentioned. The Khan, narrow of vision, saw only a mountain kingdom for himself, reaching down into the plains of Persia and India, and backed by European guns — not realizing those same guns could just as easily overwhelm him when the time was ripe.

But O'Donnell, with his western wisdom, read behind the dark stranger's words, and recognized there a plan of imperial dimensions, and the plot of a European power to seize half of Asia. And the first move in that game was to be the gathering of warriors by Shaibar Khan. How? With the treasure of Khuwarezm! With it he could buy all the swords of Central Asia.

So the dark man talked and the Uzbek listened like an old wolf who harks to the trampling of the musk oxen in the snow. O'Donnell listened, his blood freezing as the dark man casually spoke of invasions and massacres; and as the plot progressed and became more plain in detail, more monstrous and ruthless in conception, he trembled with a mad urge to leap from his cover and slash and hack both these bloody devils into pieces with the scimitar that quivered in his nervous grasp. Only a sense of self-preservation stayed him from this madness; and presently Shaibar Khan concluded the audience and left the chamber, followed by the dark stranger. O'Donnell saw this one smile furtively, like a man who has victory in his grasp.

O'Donnell started to draw aside the curtain, when Ahmed Pasha came padding into the chamber. It occurred to the American that it would be better to let the vizir find him at his post. But before Ahmed could speak, or draw aside the curtain, there sounded a rapid pattering of bare feet in the corridor outside, and a man burst into the room, wild eyed and panting. At the sight of him a red mist wavered across O'Donnell's sight. It was Yar Akbar!

III
Wolf Pack

The Afridi fell on his knees before Ahmed Pasha. His garments were tattered; blood seeped from a broken tooth and clotted his straggly beard.

"Oh, master," he panted, "the dog has escaped!"

"Escaped!" The vizir rose to his full height, his face convulsed with passion. O'Donnell thought that he would strike down the Afridi, but his arm quivered, fell by his side.

"Speak!" The Persian's voice was dangerous as the hiss of a cobra.

"We hedged him in a dark alley," Yar Akbar babbled. "He fought like *Shaitan*. Then others came to his aid — a whole nest of Turkomans, we thought, but mayhap it was but one man. He too was a devil! He slashed my side — see the blood! For hours since we have hunted them, but found no trace. *He* is over the wall and gone!" In his agitation Yar Akbar plucked at a chain about his neck; from it depended an oval like that held by O'Donnell. The American realized that Yar Akbar, too, was an *emir* of the Treasure. The Afridi's eyes burned like a wolf's in the gloom, and his voice sank.

"He who wounded me slew Othman," he whispered fearfully, "and despoiled him of the *talsmin!"*

"Dog!" The vizir's blow knocked the Afridi sprawling. Ahmed Pasha was livid. "Call the other *emirs* of the Inner Chamber, swiftly!"

Yar Akbar hastened into the corridor, and Ahmed Pasha called:

"Ohe! You who hide behind the hangings — come forth!" There was no reply, and pale with sudden suspicion, Ahmed drew a curved dagger and with a pantherish spring tore the tapestry aside. The alcove was empty.

As he glared in bewilderment, Yar Akbar ushered into the chamber as unsavory a troop of ruffians as a man might meet, even in the Hills: Uzbeks, Afghans, Gilzais, Pathans, scarred with crime and old in wickedness. Ahmed Pasha counted them swiftly. With Yar Akbar there were eleven.

“Eleven,” he muttered. “And dead Othman makes twelve. All these men are known to you, Yar Akbar?”

“My head on it!” swore the Afridi. “These be all true men.”

Ahmed clutched his beard.

“Then, by God, the One True God,” he groaned, “that Kurd I set to guard the Khan was a spy and a traitor.” And at that moment a shriek and a clash of steel re-echoed through the palace.

When O'Donnell heard Yar Akbar gasping out his tale to the vizir, he knew the game was up. He did not believe that the alcove was a blind niche in the wall; and, running swift and practiced hands over the panels, he found and pressed a hidden catch. An instant before Ahmed Pasha tore aside the tapestry, the American wriggled his lean body through the opening and found himself in a dimly lighted chamber on the other side of the wall. A black slave dozed on his haunches, unmindful of the blade that hovered over his ebony neck, as O'Donnell glided across the room and through a curtained doorway.

He found himself back in the corridor into which one door of the audience chamber opened, and crouching among the curtains, he saw Yar Akbar come up the hallway with his villainous crew. He saw, too, that they had come up a marble stair at the end of the hall.

His heart leaped. In that direction, undoubtedly, lay the treasure — now supposedly unguarded. As soon as the *emirs* vanished into the audience chamber where the vizir waited, O'Donnell ran swiftly and recklessly down the corridor.

But even as he reached the stairs, a man sitting on them sprang up, brandishing a *tulwar*. A black slave, evidently left there with definite orders, for the sight of the symbol on O'Donnell's breast did not halt him. O'Donnell took a desperate chance, gambling his speed against the cry that rose in the thick black throat.

He lost. His scimitar licked through the massive neck and the Soudani rolled down the stairs, spurting blood. But his yell had rung to the roof.

And at that yell the *emirs* of the gold came headlong out of the audience chamber, giving tongue like a pack of wolves. They did not need Ahmed's infuriated shriek of recognition and command. They were men picked for celerity of action as well as courage, and it seemed to O'Donnell that they were upon him before the negro's death yell had ceased to echo.

He met the first attacker, a hairy Pathan, with a long lunge that sent his scimitar point through the thick throat even as the man's broad *tulwar* went up for a stroke. Then a tall Uzbek swung his heavy blade like a butcher's cleaver. No time to parry; O'Donnell caught the stroke near his own hilt, and his knees bent under the impact.

But the next instant the *kindhjal* in his left hand ripped through the Uzbek's entrails, and with a powerful heave of his whole body, O'Donnell hurled the dying man against those behind him, bearing them back with him. Then O'Donnell wheeled and ran, his eyes blazing defiance of the death that whickered at his back.

Ahead of him another stair led up. O'Donnell reached it one long bound ahead of his pursuers, gained the steps and wheeled, all in one motion, slashing down at the heads of the pack that came clamoring after him.

Shaibar Khan's broad pale face peered up at the melee from the curtains of an archway, and O'Donnell was grateful to the Khan's obsessional fear that had barred firearms from the palace. Otherwise, he would already have been shot down like a dog. He himself had no gun; the pistol with which he had started the adventure had slipped from its holster somewhere on that long journey, and lay lost among the snows of the Himalayas.

No matter; he had never yet met his match with cold steel. But no blade could long have held off the ever increasing horde that swarmed up the stair at him.

He had the advantage of position, and they could not crowd past him on the narrow stair; their very numbers hindered them. His flesh crawled with the fear that others would come down the stair and take him from behind, but none came. He retreated slowly, plying his dripping blades with berserk frenzy. A steady stream of taunts and curses flowed from his lips, but even in his fury he spoke in the tongues of the East, and not one of his assailants realized that the madman who opposed them was anything but a Kurd.

He was bleeding from a dozen flesh cuts, when he reached the head of the stairs which ended in an open trap. Simultaneously the wolves below him came clambering up to drag him down. One gripped his knees, another was hewing madly at his head. The others howled below them, unable to get at their prey.

O'Donnell stooped beneath the sweep of a *tulwar* and his scimitar split the skull of the wielder. His *kindhjal* he drove through the breast of the man who clung to his knees, and kicking the clinging body away from him, he reeled up through the trap. With frantic energy, he gripped the heavy iron-bound door and slammed it down, falling across it in semi-collapse.

The splintering of wood beneath him warned him and he rolled clear just as a steel point crunched up through the door and quivered in the starlight. He found and shot the bolt, and then lay prostrate, panting for breath. How long the heavy wood would resist the attacks from below he did not know.

He was on a flat-topped roof, the highest part of the palace. Rising, he stumbled over to the nearest parapet, and looked down, on to lower roofs. He saw no way to get down. He was trapped.

It was the darkness just before dawn. He was on a higher level than the walls or any of the other houses in Shahrazar. He could dimly make out the sheer of the great cliffs which flanked the valley in which Shahrazar stood, and he saw the starlight's pale glimmer on the slim river which trickled past the massive walls. The valley ran southeast and northwest.

And suddenly the wind, whispering down from the north, brought a burst of crackling reports. Shots? He stared northwestward, toward where, he knew, the valley pitched upward, narrowing to a sheer gut, and a mud-walled village dominated the pass. He saw a dull red glow against the sky. Again came reverberations.

Somewhere in the streets below sounded a frantic clatter of flying hoofs that halted before the palace gate. There was silence then, in which O'Donnell heard the splintering blows on the trap door, and

the heavy breathing of the men who struck them. Then suddenly they ceased as if the attackers had dropped dead; utter silence attended a shrilling voice, indistinct through distance and muffling walls. A wild clamor burst forth in the streets below; men shouted, women screamed.

No more blows fell on the trap. Instead there were noises below — the rattle of arms, tramp of men, and a voice that held a note of hysteria shouting orders.

O'Donnell heard the clatter of galloping horses, and saw torches moving through the streets, toward the northwestern gate. In the darkness up the valley he saw orange jets of flame and heard the unmistakable reports of firearms.

Shrugging his shoulders, he sat down in an angle of the parapet, his scimitar across his knees. And there weary Nature asserted itself, and in spite of the clamor below him, and the riot in his blood, he slept.

IV
Furious Battle!

He did not sleep long, for dawn was just stealing whitely over the mountains when he awoke. Rifles were cracking all around, and crouching at the parapet, he saw the reason. Shahrazar was besieged by warriors in sheepskin coats and fur *kalpaks*. Herds of their horses grazed just beyond rifle fire, and the warriors themselves were firing from every rock and tree. Numbers of them were squirming along the half dry river bed, among the willows, sniping at the men on the walls, who gave back their fire.

The Turkomans of Orkhan Bahadur! That blaze in the darkness told of the fate of the village that guarded the pass. Turks seldom made night raids; but Orkhan was nothing if not original.

The Uzbeks manned the walls, and O'Donnell believed he could make out the bulky shape and crested turban of Shaibar Khan among a cluster of peacock-clad nobles. And as he gazed at the

turmoil in the streets below, the belief grew that every available Uzbek in the city was on the walls. This was no mere raid; it was a tribal war of extermination.

O'Donnell's Irish audacity rose like heady wine in his veins, and he tore aside the splintered door and gazed down the stairs. The bodies still lay on the steps, stiff and unseeing. No living human met his gaze as he stole down the stairs, scimitar in hand. He gained the broad corridor, and still he saw no one. He hurried down the stair whereon he had slain the black slave, and reached a broad chamber with a single tapestried door.

There was the sudden crash of a musket; a spurt of flame stabbed at him. The ball whined past him and he covered the space with a long leap, grappled a snarling, biting figure behind the tapestry and dragged it into the open. It was Ahmed Pasha.

"Accursed one!" The vizir fought like a mad dog. "I guessed you would come skulking here — Allah's curse on the *hashish* that has made my hand unsteady —"

His dagger girded through O'Donnell's garments, drawing blood. Under his silks the Persian's muscles were like taut wires. Employing his superior weight, the American hurled himself hard against the other, driving the vizir's head back against the stone wall with a stunning crack. As the Persian relaxed with a groan, O'Donnell's left hand wrenched from his grasp and lurched upward, and the keen *kindhjal* encountered flesh and bone.

The American lifted the still twitching corpse and thrust it behind the tapestry, hiding it as best he could. A bunch of keys at the dead man's girdle caught his attention, and they were in his hand as he approached the curtained door.

The heavy teakwood portal, bound in arabesqued copper, would have resisted any onslaught short of artillery. A moment's fumbling with the massive keys, and O'Donnell found the right one. He passed into a narrow corridor dimly lighted by some obscure means. The walls were of marble, the floor of mosaics. It ended at what

seemed to be a blank carven wall, until O'Donnell saw a thin crack in the marble.

Through carelessness or haste, the secret door had been left partly open. O'Donnell heard no sound, and was inclined to believe that Ahmed Pasha had remained to guard the treasure alone. He gave the vizir credit for wit and courage.

O'Donnell pulled open the door — a wide block of marble revolving on a pivot — and halted short, a low cry escaping his lips. He had come full upon the treasure of Khuwarezm, and the sight stunned him!

The dim light must have come through hidden interstices in the colored dome of the circular chamber in which he stood. It illumined a shining pyramidal heap upon a dais in the center of the floor, a platform that was a great round slab of pure jade. And on that jade gleamed tokens of wealth beyond the dreams of madness. The foundations of the pile consisted of blocks of virgin gold and upon them lay, rising to a pinnacle of blazing splendor, ingots of hammered silver, ornaments of golden enamel, wedges of jade, pearls of incredible perfection, inlaid ivory, diamonds that dazzled the sight, rubies like clotted blood, emeralds like drops of green fire, pulsing sapphires — O'Donnell's senses refused to accept the wonder of what he saw. Here, indeed, was wealth sufficient to buy every sword in Asia. A sudden sound brought him about. Someone was coming down the corridor outside, someone who labored for breath and ran staggeringly. A quick glance around, and O'Donnell slipped behind the rich gilt-worked arras which masked the walls. A niche where, perhaps, had stood an idol in the old pagan days, admitted his lean body, and he gazed through a slit cut in the velvet.

It was Shaibar Khan who came into the chamber. The Khan's garments were torn and splashed darkly. He stared at his treasure

with haunted eyes, and he groaned. Then he called for Ahmed Pasha.

One man came, but it was not the vizir who lay dead in the outer corridor. It was Yar Akbar, crouching like a great grey wolf, beard bristling in his perpetual snarl.

“Why was the treasure left unguarded?” demanded Shaibar Khan petulantly. “Where is Ahmed Pasha?”

“He sent us on the wall,” answered Yar Akbar, hunching his shoulders in servile abasement. “He said he would guard the treasure himself.”

“No matter!” Shaibar Khan was shaking like a man with an ague. “We are lost. The people have risen against me and opened the gates to that devil Orkhan Bahadur. His Turkomans are cutting down my Uzbeks in the streets. But he shall not have the treasure. See ye that golden bar that juts from the wall, like a sword hilt from the scabbard? I have but to pull that, and the treasure falls into the subterranean river which runs below this palace, to be lost forever to the sight of men. Yar Akbar, I give you a last command — pull that bar!”

Yar Akbar moaned and wrung his beard, but his eyes were red as a wolf’s, and he turned his ear continually toward the outer door.

“Nay, lord, ask of me anything but that!”

“Then I will do it!” Shaibar Khan moved toward the bar, reached out his hand to grasp it. With a snarl of a wild beast, Yar Akbar sprang on his back, grunting as he struck. O’Donnell saw the point of the Khyber knife spring out of Shaibar Khan’s silk-clad breast, as the Uzbek chief threw wide his arms, cried out chokingly, and tumbled forward to the floor. Yar Akbar spurned the dying body with a vicious foot.

“Fool!” he croaked. “I will buy my life from Orkhan Bahadur. Aye, this treasure shall gain me much honor with him, now the other *emirs* are dead —”

He halted, crouching and glaring, the reddened knife quivering in his hairy fist. O'Donnell had swept aside the tapestry and stepped into the open. "Y'Allah!" ejaculated the Afridi. "The dog-Kurd!"

"Look more closely, Yar Akbar," answered O'Donnell grimly, throwing back his *kafiyeh* and speaking in English. "Do you not remember the Gorge of Izz ed din and the scout trapped there by your treachery? One man escaped, you dog of the Khyber."

Slowly a red flame grew in Yar Akbar's eyes.

"El Shirkuh!" he muttered, giving O'Donnell his Afghan name — the Mountain Lion. Then, with a howl that rang to the domed roof, he launched himself through the air, his three-foot knife gleaming.

O'Donnell did not move his feet. A supple twist of his torso avoided the thrust, and the furiously driven knife hissed between left arm and body, tearing his *khalat*. At the same instant O'Donnell's left forearm bent up and under the lunging arm that guided the knife. Yar Akbar screamed, spit on the *kindhjal's* narrow blade. Unable to halt his headlong rush, he caromed bodily against O'Donnell, bearing him down.

They struck the floor together, and Yar Akbar, with a foot of trenchant steel in his vitals, yet reared up, caught O'Donnell's hair in a fierce grasp, gasped a curse, lifted his knife — and then his wild beast vitality failed him, and with a convulsive shudder he rolled clear and lay still in a spreading pool of blood.

O'Donnell rose and stared down at the bodies upon the floor, then at the glittering heap on the jade slab. His soul yearned to it with the fierce yearning that had haunted him for years. Dared he take the desperate chance of hiding it under the very noses of the invading Turkomans? If he could, he might escape, to return later, and bear it away. He had taken more desperate chances before.

Across his mental vision flashed a picture of a slim dark stranger who spoke a European tongue. It was lure of the treasure which had

led Orkhan Bahadur out of his steppes; and the treasure in his hands would be as dangerous as it was in the hands of Shaibar Khan. The Power represented by the dark stranger could deal with the Turkoman as easily as with the Uzbek.

No; one Oriental adventurer with that treasure was as dangerous to the peace of Asia as another. He dared not run the risk of Orkhan Bahadur finding that pile of gleaming wealth — sweat suddenly broke out on O'Donnell's body as he realized, for once in his life, a driving power mightier than his own desire. The helpless millions of India were in his mind as, cursing sickly, he gripped the gold bar and heaved it!

With a grinding boom something gave way, the jade slab moved, turned, tilted and disappeared, and with it vanished, in a final iridescent burst of dazzling splendor, the treasure of Khuwarezm. Far below came a sullen splash, and the sound of waters roaring in the darkness; then silence, and where a black hole had gaped there showed a circular slab of the same substance as the rest of the floor.

O'Donnell hurried from the chamber. He did not wish to be found where the Turkomans might connect him with the vanishing of the treasure they had battled to win. Let them think, if they would, that Shaibar Khan and Yar Akbar had disposed of it somehow, and slain one another. As he emerged from the palace into an outer court, lean warriors in sheepskin *kaftans* and high fur caps were swarming in. Cartridge belts crossed on their breasts, and *yataghans* hung at their girdles. One of them lifted a rifle and took deliberate aim at O'Donnell.

Then it was struck aside, and a voice shouted:

"By Allah, it is my friend Ali el Ghazi!" There strode forward a tall man whose *kalpak* was of white lambskin, and whose *kaftan* was trimmed with ermine. O'Donnell recognized the man he had aided in the alley.

"I am Orkhan Bahadur!" exclaimed the chief with a ringing laugh. "Put up your sword, friend; Shahrazar is mine! The heads of the

Uzbeks are heaped in the market square! When I fled from their swords last night, they little guessed my warriors awaited my coming in the mountains beyond the pass! Now I am prince of Shahrazar, and thou art my cup-companion. Ask what thou wilt, yea, even a share of the treasure of Khuwarezm — when we find it."

"When you find it!" O'Donnell mentally echoed, sheathing his scimitar with a Kurdish swagger. The American was something of a fatalist. He had come out of this adventure with his life at least, and the rest was in the hands of Allah.

"Alhamdolillah!" said O'Donnell, joining arms with his new cup-companion.

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Swords of Shahrazar

Kirby O'Donnell opened his chamber door and gazed out, his long keen-bladed *kindhjal* in his hand. Somewhere a cresset glowed fitfully, dimly lighting the broad hallway, flanked by thick columns. The spaces between these columns were black arched wells of darkness, where anything might be lurking.

Nothing moved within his range of vision. The great hall seemed deserted. But he knew that he had not merely dreamed that he heard the stealthy pad of bare feet outside his door, the stealthy sound of unseen hands trying the portal.

O'Donnell felt the peril that crawled unseen about him, the first white man ever to set foot in forgotten Shahrazar, the forbidden, age-old city brooding high among the Afghan mountains. He believed his disguise was perfect; as Ali el Ghazi, a wandering Kurd, he had entered Shahrazar, and as such he was a guest in the palace of its prince. But the furtive footfalls that had awakened him were a sinister portent.

He stepped out into the hall cautiously, closing the door behind him. A single step he took — it was the swish of a garment that warned him. He whirled, quick as a cat, and saw, all in a split second, a great black body hurtling at him from the shadows, the gleam of a plunging knife. And simultaneously he himself moved in a blinding blur of speed. A shift of his whole body avoided the stroke, and as the blade licked past, splitting only thin air, his *kindhjal*, driven with desperate energy, sank its full length in the black torso.

An agonized groan was choked by a rush of blood in the dusky throat. The Negro's knife rang on the marble floor, and the great black figure, checked in its headlong rush, swayed drunkenly and pitched forward. O'Donnell watched with his eyes as hard as flint as the would-be murderer shuddered convulsively and then lay still in a widening crimson pool.

He recognized the man, and as he stood staring down at his victim, a train of associations passed swiftly through his mind, recollections of past events crowding on a realization of his present situation.

Lure of treasure had brought O'Donnell in his disguise to forbidden Shahrazar. Since the days of Genghis Khan, Shahrazar had sheltered the treasure of the long-dead shahs of Khuwarezm. Many an adventurer had sought that fabled hoard, and many had died. But O'Donnell had found it — only to lose it.

Hardly had he arrived in Shahrazar when a band of marauding Turkomans, under their chief, Orkhan Bahadur, had stormed the city and captured it, slaying its prince, the Uzbek Shaibar Khan. And while the battle raged in the streets, O'Donnell had found the hidden treasure in a secret chamber, and his brain had reeled at its splendor. But he had been unable to bear it away, and he dared not leave it for Orkhan. The emissary of an intriguing European power was in Shahrazar, plotting to use that treasure to conquer India. O'Donnell had done away with it forever. The victorious Turkomans had searched for it in vain.

O’Donnell, as Ali el Ghazi, had once saved Orkhan Bahadur’s life, and the prince made the supposed Kurd welcome in the palace. None dreamed of his connection with the disappearance of the hoard, unless — O’Donnell stared somberly down at the figure on the marble floor.

That man was Baber, a Soudani servant of Suleiman Pasha, the emissary.

O’Donnell lifted his head and swept his gaze over the black arches, the shadowy columns. Had he only imagined that he heard movement back in the darkness? Bending over quickly, he grasped the limp body and heaved it on his shoulder — an act impossible for a man with less steely thews — and started down the hall. A corpse found before his door meant questions, and the fewer questions O’Donnell had to answer the better.

He went down the broad, silent hall and descended a wide marble stair into swallowing gloom, like an oriental demon carrying a corpse to hell; groped through a tapestried door and down a short, black corridor to a blank marble wall.

When he thrust against this with his foot, a section swung inward, working on a pivot, and he entered a circular, domed chamber with a marble floor and walls hung with heavy gilt-worked tapestries, between which showed broad golden frieze-work. A bronze lamp cast a soft light, making the dome seem lofty and full of shadows, while the tapestries were clinging squares of velvet darkness.

This had been the treasure vault of Shaibar Khan, and why it was empty now, only Kirby O’Donnell could tell.

Lowering the black body with a gasp of relief, for the burden had taxed even his wiry thews to the utmost, he deposited it exactly on the great disk that formed the center of the marble floor. Then he crossed the chamber, seized a gold bar that seemed merely part of the ornamentation, and jerked it strongly. Instantly the great central disk revolved silently, revealing a glimpse of a black opening, into which the corpse tumbled. The sound of rushing water welled up from the darkness, and then the slab, swinging on its pivot,

completed its revolution and the floor showed again a smooth unbroken surface.

But O'Donnell wheeled suddenly. The lamp burned low, filling the chamber with a lurid unreal light. In that light he saw the door open silently and a slim dark figure glide in.

It was a slender man with long nervous hands and an ivory oval of a face, pointed with a short black beard. His eyes were long and oblique, his garments dark, even his turban. In his hand a blue, snub-nosed revolver glinted dully.

"Suleiman Pasha!" muttered O'Donnell tensely.

He had never been able to decide whether this man was the Oriental he seemed, or a European in masquerade. Had the man penetrated his own disguise? The emissary's first words assured him that such was not the case.

"Ali el Ghazi," said Suleiman, "you have lost me a valuable servant, but you have told me a secret. None other knows the secret of that revolving slab. I did not, until I followed you, after you killed Baber, and watched you through the door, though I have suspected that this chamber was the treasure vault.

"I have suspected you — now I am certain. I know why the treasure has never been found. You disposed of it as you have disposed of Baber. You are cup-companion to Prince Orkhan Bahadur. But if I told him you cast away the treasure forever, do you suppose his friendship would prevail over his wrath?

"Keep back!" he warned. "I did not say that I would tell Orkhan. Why you threw away the treasure I cannot guess, unless it was because of fanatical loyalty to Shaibar Kahn."

He looked him over closely. "Face like a hawk, body of coiled steel springs," he murmured. "I can use you, my Kurdish swaggerer."

"How use me?" demanded O'Donnell.

“You can help me in the game I play with Orkhan Bahadur. The treasure is gone, but I can still use him, I and the *Feringis* who employ me. I will make him amir of Afghanistan and, after that, sultan of India.”

“And the puppet of the *Feringis,”* grunted O’Donnell.

“What is that to thee?” Suleiman laughed. “Thine is not to think. I will do the thinking; see thou to the enacting of my commands.”

“I have not said that I would serve you,” growled O’Donnell doggedly.

“You have no other choice,” answered Suleiman calmly. “If you refuse, I will reveal to Orkhan that which I learned tonight, and he will have you flayed alive.”

O’Donnell bent his head moodily. He was caught in a vise of circumstances. It had not been loyalty to Shaibar Khan, as Suleiman thought, which had caused him to dump an emperor’s ransom in gold and jewels into the subterranean river. He knew Suleiman plotted the overthrow of British rule in India and the massacre of the helpless millions. He knew that Orkhan Bahadur, a ruthless adventurer despite his friendship for the false Kurd, was a pliant tool in the emissary’s hands. The treasure had been too potent a weapon to leave within their reach.

Suleiman was either a Russian or the Oriental tool of the Russians. Perhaps he, too, had secret ambitions. The Khuwarezm treasure had been a pawn in his game but, even without it, a tool of the emissary’s sitting on the throne of Shahrazar, was a living menace to the peace of India. So O’Donnell had remained in the city, seeking in every way to thwart Suleiman’s efforts to dominate Orkhan Bahadur. And now he himself was trapped.

He lifted his head and stared murderously at the slim Oriental. “What do you wish me to do?” he muttered.

“I have a task for you,” answered Suleiman. “An hour ago word came to me, by one of my secret agents, that the tribesmen of Khuruk have found an Englishman dying in the hills, with valuable

papers upon him. I must have those papers. I sent the man on to Orkhan, while I dealt with you.

"But I have changed my plans in regard to you; you are more valuable to me alive than dead, since there is no danger of your opposing me in the future. Orkhan will desire those papers that the Englishman carried, for the man was undoubtedly a secret-service agent, and I will persuade the prince to send you with a troop of horsemen to secure them. And remember you are taking your real orders from me, not from Orkhan."

He stepped aside and motioned O'Donnell to precede him.

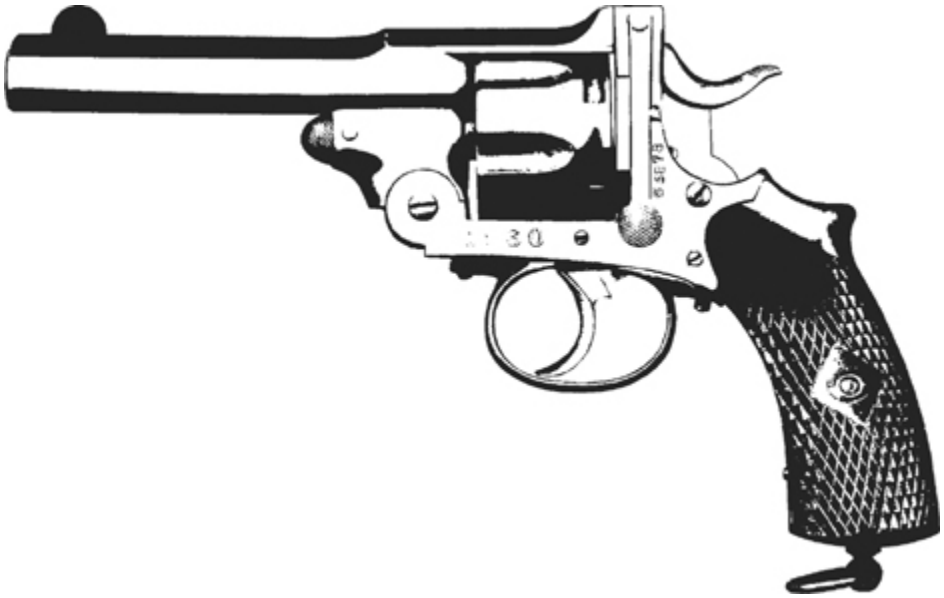
They traversed the short corridor, an electric torch in Suleiman's left hand playing its beam on his sullen, watchful companion, climbed the stair and went through the wide hall, thence along a winding corridor and into a chamber where Orkhan Bahadur stood near a gold-barred window which opened onto an arcaded court, which was just being whitened by dawn. The prince of Shahrazar was resplendent in satin and pearl-sewn velvet which did not mask the hard lines of his lean body.

His thin dark features lighted at the sight of his cup-companion, but O'Donnell reflected on the wolf that lurked ever below the surface of this barbaric chieftain, and how suddenly it could be unmasked, snarling and flame-eyed.

"Welcome, friends!" said the Turkoman, pacing the chamber restlessly. "I have heard a tale! Three days' ride to the southwest are the villages of Ahmed Shah, in the valley of Khuruk. Four days ago his men came upon a man dying in the mountains. He wore the garments of an Afghan, but in his delirium he revealed himself as an Englishman. When he was dead they searched him for loot and found certain papers which none of the dogs could read.

"But in his ravings he spoke of having been to Bokhara. It is in my mind that this *Feringi* was an English spy, returning to India with papers valuable to the *sirkar*. Perhaps the British would pay well for these papers, if they knew of them. It is my wish to possess them.

Yet I dare not ride forth myself, nor send many men. Suppose the treasure was found in my absence? My own men would bar the gates against me."



"This is a matter for diplomacy rather than force," put in Suleiman Pasha smoothly. "Ali el Ghazi is crafty as well as bold. Send him with fifty men."

"Can thou do it, brother?" demanded Orkhan eagerly.

Suleiman's gaze burned into O'Donnell's soul. There was but one answer, if he wished to escape flaying steel and searing fire.

"Only in Allah is power," he muttered. "Yet I can attempt the thing."

"Mashallah!" exclaimed Orkhan. "Be ready to start within the hour. There is a Khurukzai in the suk, one Dost Shah, who is of Ahmed's clan, and will guide you. There is friendship between me and the men of Khuruk. Approach Ahmed Shah in peace and offer him gold for the papers, but not too much, lest his cupidity be roused. But I leave it to your own judgment. With fifty men there is no fear of the smaller clans between Shahrazar and Khuruk. I go now to choose the men to ride with you."

As soon as Orkhan left the chamber, Suleiman bent close to O'Donnell and whispered: "Secure the papers, but do not bring them to Orkhan! Pretend that you have lost them in the hills — anything — but bring them to *me.*"

"Orkhan will be angry and suspicious," objected O'Donnell.

"Not half as angry as he would be if he knew what became of the Khuwarezm treasure," retorted Suleiman. "Your only chance is to obey me. If your men return without you, saying you have fled away, be sure a hundred men will quickly be upon your trail — nor can you hope to win alone through these hostile, devil-haunted hills, anyway. Do not dare to return without the papers, if you do not wish to be denounced to Orkhan. Your life depends on your playing my game, Kurd!"

II

Playing Suleiman's "game" seemed to be the only thing to do, even three days later as O'Donnell, in his guise of the Kurdish swashbuckler, Ali el Ghazi, was riding along a trail that followed a ledgelike fold of rock ribbing a mile-wide cliff.

Just ahead of him on a bony crow-bait rode the Khurukzai guide, a hairy savage with a dirty white turban, and behind him strung out in single file fifty of Orkhan Bahadur's picked warriors. O'Donnell felt the pride of a good leader of fighting men as he glanced back at them. These were no stunted peasants, but tall, sinewy men with the pride and temper of hawks; nomads and sons of nomads, born to the saddle. They rode horses that were distinctive in that land of horsemen, and their rifles were modern repeaters.

"Listen!" It was the Khurukzai who halted suddenly, lifting a hand in warning.

O'Donnell leaned forward, rising in the wide silver stirrups, turning his head slightly sidewise. A gust of wind whipped along the ledge, bearing with it the echoes of a series of sputtering reports.

The men behind O'Donnell heard it, too, and there was a creaking of saddles as they instinctively unslung rifles and hitched yataghan hilts forward.

"Rifles!" exclaimed Dost Shah. "Men are fighting in the hills."

"How far are we from Khuruk?" asked O'Donnell.

"An hour's ride," answered the Khurukzai, glancing at the mid-afternoon sun. "Beyond the corner of the cliff we can see the Pass of Akbar, which is the boundary of Ahmed Shah's territory. Khuruk is some miles beyond."

"Push on, then," said O'Donnell.

They moved on around the crag which jutted out like the prow of a ship, shutting off all view to the south. The path narrowed and sloped there, so the men dismounted and edged their way, leading the animals which grew half frantic with fear.

Ahead of them the trail broadened and sloped up to a fan-shaped plateau, flanked by rugged ridges. This plateau narrowed to a pass in a solid wall of rock hundreds of feet high; the pass was a triangular gash, and a stone tower in its mouth commanded the approach. There were men in the tower, and they were firing at other men who lay out on the plateau in a wide ragged crescent, concealed behind boulders and rocky ledges. But these were not all firing at the tower, as it presently became apparent.

Off to the left of the pass, skirting the foot of the cliffs, a ravine meandered. Men were hiding in this ravine, and O'Donnell quickly saw that they were trapped there. The men out on the plateau had cast a cordon around it and were working their way closer, shooting as they came. The men in the ravine fired back, and a few corpses were strewn among the rocks. But from the sound of the firing, there were only a few men in the gully, and the men in the tower could not come to their aid. It would have been suicide to try to cross that bullet-swept open space between the ravine and the pass mouth.

O'Donnell had halted his men at an angle of the cliff where the trail wound up toward the plateau, and had advanced with the

Khurukzai guide part way up the incline.

"What does this mean?" he asked.

Dost Shah shook his head like one puzzled. "That is the Pass of Akbar," he said. "That tower is Ahmed Shah's. Sometimes the tribes come to fight us, and we shoot them from the tower. It can only be Ahmed's riflemen in the tower and in the ravine. But —"

He shook his head again, and having tied his horse to a straggling tamarisk, he went up the slope, craning his neck and hugging his rifle, while he muttered in his beard as if in uncertainty.

O'Donnell followed him to the crest where the trail bent over the rim of the plateau, but with more caution than the Khurukzai was showing. They were now within rifle range of the combatants, and bullets were whistling like hornets across the plateau.

O'Donnell could plainly make out the forms of the besiegers lying among the rocks that littered the narrow plain. Evidently they had not noticed him and the guide, and he did not believe they saw his men where he had stationed them in the shade of an overhanging crag. All their attention was fixed on the ravine, and they yelled with fierce exultation as a turban thrust above its rim fell back splashed with crimson. The men in the tower yelled with helpless fury.

"Keep your head down, you fool!" O'Donnell swore at Dost Shah, who was carelessly craning his long neck above a cluster of rocks.

"The men in the tower *must* be Ahmed's men," muttered Dost Shah uneasily. "Yes; it could not be otherwise, yet — Allah!" The last was an explosive yelp, and he sprang up like a madman, as if forgetting all caution in some other overwhelming emotion.

O'Donnell cursed and grabbed at him to pull him down, but he stood brandishing his rifle, his tattered garments whipping in the wind like a demon of the hills.

"What devil's work is this?" he yelled. "That is not — those are not —"

His voice changed to a gasp as a bullet drilled him through the temple. He tumbled back to the ground and lay without motion.

“Now what was he going to say?” muttered O’Donnell, peering out over the rocks. “Was that a stray slug, or did somebody see him?”

He could not tell whether the shot came from the boulders or the tower. It was typical of hill warfare, the yells and shooting keeping up an incessant devil’s din. One thing was certain: the cordon was gradually closing about the men trapped in the ravine. They were well hidden from the bullets, but the attackers were working so close that presently they could finish the job with a short swift rush and knife work at close quarters.

O’Donnell fell back down the incline, and coming to the eager Turkomans, spoke hurriedly: “Dost Shah is dead, but he has brought us to the borders of Ahmed Shah’s territory. Those in the tower are Khurukzai, and these men attacking them have cut off some chief — probably Ahmed Shah himself — in that ravine. I judge that from the noise both sides are making. Then, they’d scarcely be taking such chances to slaughter a few common warriors. If we rescue him we shall have a claim on his friendship, and our task will be made easy, as Allah makes all things for brave men.

“The men attacking seem to me not to number more than a hundred men — twice our number, true, but there are circumstances in our favor, surprise, and the fact that the men in the pass will undoubtedly sally out if we create a diversion in the enemy’s rear. At present the Khurukzai are bottled in the pass. They cannot emerge, any more than the raiders can enter in the teeth of their bullets.”

“We await orders,” the men answered.

Turkomans have no love for Kurds, but the horsemen knew that Ali el Ghazi was cup-companion to their prince.

“Ten men to hold the horses!” he snapped. “The rest follow me.”

A few minutes later they were crawling after him up the short slope. He lined them along the crest, seeing that each man was sheltered among the boulders.

This took but a few minutes, but in that interim the men crawling toward the ravine sprang to their feet and tore madly across the intervening space, yelling like blood-crazed wolves, their curved blades glittering in the sun. Rifles spat from the gully and three of the attackers dropped, and the men in the tower sent up an awful howl and turned their guns desperately on the charging mob. But the range at that angle was too great.

Then O'Donnell snapped an order, and a withering line of flame ran along the crest of the ridge. His men were picked marksmen and understood the value of volleys. Some thirty men were in the open, charging the ravine. A full half of them went down struck from behind, as if by some giant invisible fist. The others halted, realizing that something was wrong; they cringed dazedly, turning here and there, grasping their long knives, while the bullets of the Turkomans took further toll.

Then, suddenly, realizing that they were being attacked from the rear, they dived screaming for cover. The men in the tower, sensing reinforcements, sent up a wild shout and redoubled their fire.

The Turkomans, veterans of a hundred wild battles, hugged their boulders and kept aiming and firing without the slightest confusion. The men on the plateau were kicking up the devil's own din. They were caught in the jaws of the vise, with bullets coming from both ways, and no way of knowing the exact numbers of their new assailants.

The break came with hurricane suddenness, as is nearly always the case in hill fighting. The men on the plain broke and fled westward, a disorderly mob, scrambling over boulders and leaping gullies, their tattered garments flapping in the wind.

The Turkomans sent a last volley into their backs, toppling over distant figures like tenpins, and the men in the tower gave tongue and began scrambling down into the pass.

O’Donnell cast a practiced eye at the fleeing marauders, knew that the rout was final, and called for the ten men below him to bring up the horses swiftly. He had an eye for dramatics, and he knew the effect they would make filing over the ridge and out across the boulder-strewn plain on their Turkish steeds.

A few minutes later he enjoyed that effect and the surprised yells of the men they had aided as they saw the Astrakhan *kalpaks* of the riders top the ridge. The pass was crowded with men in ragged garments, grasping rifles, and in evident doubt as to the status of the newcomers.

O’Donnell headed straight for the ravine, which was nearer the ridge than it was to the pass, believing the Khurukzai chief was among those trapped there.

His rifle was slung on his back, and his open right hand raised as a sign of peace; seeing which the men in the pass dubiously lowered their rifles and came streaming across the plateau toward him, instead of pursuing the vanquished, who were already disappearing among the distant crags and gullies.

A dozen steps from the ridge of the ravine O’Donnell drew rein, glimpsing turbans among the rocks, and called out a greeting in *Pashtu*. A deep bellowing voice answered him, and a vast figure heaved up into full view, followed by half a dozen lesser shapes.

“Allah be with thee!” roared the first man.

He was tall, broad, and powerful; his beard was stained with henna, and his eyes blazed like fires burning under gray ice. One massive fist gripped a rifle, the thumb of the other was hooked into the broad silken girdle which banded his capacious belly, as he tilted back on his heels and thrust his beard out truculently. That girdle likewise supported a broad tulwar and three or four knives.

“Mashallah!” roared this individual. “I had thought it was my own men who had taken the dogs in the rear, until I saw those fur caps. Ye are Turks from Shahrazar, no doubt?”

“Aye; I am Ali el Ghazi, a Kurd, brother-in-arms to Orkhan Bahadur. You are Ahmed Shah, lord of Khuruk?”

There was a hyenalike cackle of laughter from the lean, evil-eyed men who had followed the big man out of the gully.

“Ahmed Shah has been in hell these four days,” rumbled the giant. “I am Afzal Khan, whom men name the Butcher.”

O’Donnell sensed rather than heard a slight stir among the men behind him. Most of them understood *Pashtu*, and the deeds of Afzal Khan had found echo in the *serais* of Turkestan. The man was an outlaw, even in that lawless land, a savage plunderer whose wild road was lurid with the smoke and blood of slaughter.

“But that pass is the gateway to Khuruk,” said O’Donnell, slightly bewildered.

“Aye!” agreed Afzal Khan affably. “Four days ago I came down into the valley from the east and drove out the Khurukzai dogs. Ahmed Shah I slew with my own hands — so!”

A flicker of red akin to madness flamed up momentarily in his eyes as he smashed the butt of his rifle down on a dead tamarisk branch, shattering it from the trunk. It was as if the mere mention of murder roused the sleeping devil in him. Then his beard bristled in a fierce grin.

“The villages of Khuruk I burned,” he said calmly. “My men need no roofs between them and the sky. The village dogs — such as still lived — fled into the hills. This day I was hunting some from among the rocks, not deeming them wise enough to plant an ambush, when they cut me off from the pass, and the rest you know. I took refuge in the ravine. When I heard your firing I thought it was my own men.”

O’Donnell did not at once answer, but sat his horse, gazing inscrutably at the fierce, scarred countenance of the Afghan. A sidelong glance showed him the men from the tower straggling up — some seventy of them, a wild, dissolute band, ragged and hairy, with wolfish countenances and rifles in their hands. These rifles were, in most cases, inferior to those carried by his own men.

In a battle begun then and there, the advantage was still with the mounted Turkomans. Then another glance showed him more men swarming out of the pass — a hundred at least.

“The dogs come at last!” grunted Afzal Khan. “They have been gorging back in the valley. I would have been vulture bait if I had been forced to await their coming. Brother!” He strode forward to lay his hand on O’Donnell’s stirrup strap, while envy of and admiration for the magnificent Turkish stallion burned in his fierce eyes. “Brother, come with me to Khuruk! You have saved my life this day, and I would reward you fittingly.”

O’Donnell did not look at his Turkomans. He knew they were waiting for his orders and would obey him. He could draw his pistol and shoot Afzal Khan dead, and they could cut their way back

across the plateau in the teeth of the volleys that were sure to rake their line of flight. Many would escape. But why escape? Afzal Khan had every reason to show them the face of a friend, and, besides, if he had killed Ahmed Shah, it was logical to suppose that he had the papers without which O'Donnell dared not return to Shahrazar.

"We will ride with you to Khuruk, Afzal Khan," decided O'Donnell.

The Afghan combed his crimson beard with his fingers and boomed his gratification.

The ragged ruffians closed in about them as they rode toward the pass, a swarm of sheepskin coats and soiled turbans that hemmed in the clean-cut riders in their fur caps and girdled *kaftans*.

O'Donnell did not miss the envy in the glances cast at the rifles and cartridge belts and horses of the Turkomans. Orkhan Bahadur was generous with his men to the point of extravagance; he had sent them out with enough ammunition to fight a small war.

Afzal Khan strode by O'Donnell's stirrup, booming his comments and apparently oblivious to everything except the sound of his own voice.

O'Donnell glanced from him to his followers. Afzal Khan was a Yusufzai, a pure-bred Afghan, but his men were a motley mob — Pathans, mostly, Orakzai, Ummer Khels, Sudozai, Afridis, Ghilzai — outcasts and nameless men from many tribes.

They went through the pass — a knife-cut gash between sheer rock walls, forty feet wide and three hundred yards long — and beyond the tower were a score of gaunt horses which Afzal Khan and some of his favored henchmen mounted. Then the chief gave pungent orders to his men; fifty of them climbed into the tower and resumed the ceaseless vigilance that is the price of life in the hills, and the rest followed him and his guests out of the pass and along the knife-edge trail that wound amid savage crags and jutting spurs.

Afzal Khan fell silent, and indeed there was scant opportunity for conversation, each man being occupied in keeping his horse or his own feet on the wavering path. The surrounding crags were so rugged and lofty that the strategic importance of the Pass of Akbar impressed itself still more strongly on O'Donnell.

Only through that pass could any body of men make their way safely. He felt uncomfortably like a man who sees a door shut behind him, blocking his escape, and he glanced furtively at Afzal Khan, riding with stirrups so short that he squatted like a huge toad in his saddle. The chief seemed preoccupied; he gnawed a wisp of his red beard and there was a blank stare in his eyes.

The sun was swinging low when they came to a second pass. This was not exactly a pass at all, in the usual sense. It was an opening in a cluster of rocky spurs that rose like fangs along the lip of a rim beyond which the land fell away in a long gradual sweep. Threading among these stony teeth, O'Donnell looked down into the valley of Khuruk.

It was not a deep valley, but it was flanked by cliffs that looked unscalable. It ran east and west, roughly, and they were entering it at the eastern end. At the western end it seemed to be blocked by a mass of crags.

There were no cultivated patches, or houses to be seen in the valley — only stretches of charred ground. Evidently the destruction of the Khurukzai villages had been thorough. In the midst of the valley stood a square stone inclosure, with a tower at one corner, such as are common in the hills, and serve as forts in times of strife.

Divining his thought, Afzal Khan pointed to this and said: "I struck like a thunderbolt. They had not time to take refuge in the *sangar*. Their watchmen on the heights were careless. We stole upon them and knifed them; then in the dawn we swept down on the villages. Nay, some escaped. We could not slay them all. They will keep coming back to harass me — as they have done this day — until I hunt them down and wipe them all out."

O’Donnell had not mentioned the papers; to have done so would have been foolish; he could think of no way to question Afzal Khan without waking the Afghan’s suspicions; he must await his opportunity.

That opportunity came unexpectedly.

“Can you read *Urdu?”* asked Afzal Khan abruptly.

“Aye!” O’Donnell made no further comment but waited with concealed tenseness.

“I cannot; nor *Pashtu*, either, for that matter,” rumbled the Afghan. “There were papers on Ahmed Shah’s body, which I believe are written in *Urdu.”*

“I might be able to read them for you.”

O’Donnell tried to speak casually, but perhaps he was not able to keep his eagerness altogether out of his voice. Afzal Khan tugged his beard, glanced at him sidewise, and changed the subject. He spoke no more of the papers and made no move to show them to his guest. O’Donnell silently cursed his own impatience; but at least he had learned that the documents he sought were in the bandit’s possession, and that Afzal Khan was ignorant of their nature — if he was not lying.

At a growled order all but sixty of the chief’s men halted among the spurs overlooking the valley. The rest trailed after him.

“They watch for the Khurukzai dogs,” he explained. “There are trails by which a few men might get through the hills, avoiding the Pass of Akbar, and reach the head of the valley.”

“Is this the only entrance to Khuruk?”

“The only one that horses can travel. There are footpaths leading through the crags from the north and the south, but I have men posted there as well. One rifleman can hold any one of them forever. My forces are scattered about the valley. I am not to be taken by surprise as I took Ahmed Shah.”

The sun was sinking behind the western hills as they rode down the valley, tailed by the men on foot. All were strangely silent, as if oppressed by the silence of the plundered valley. Their destination evidently was the inclosure, which stood perhaps a mile from the head of the valley. The valley floor was unusually free of boulders and stones, except a broken ledge like a reef that ran across the valley several hundred yards east of the fortalice. Halfway between these rocks and the inclosure, Afzal Khan halted.

"Camp here!" he said abruptly, with a tone more of command than invitation. "My men and I occupy the *sangar*, and it is well to keep our wolves somewhat apart. There is a place where your horses can be stabled, where there is plenty of fodder stored." He pointed out a stone-walled pen of considerable dimensions a few hundred yards away, near the southern cliffs. "Hungry wolves come down from the gorges and attack the horses."

"We will camp beside the pen," said O'Donnell, preferring to be closer to their mounts.

Afzal Khan showed a flash of irritation. "Do you wish to be shot in the dark for an enemy?" he growled. "Pitch your tents where I bid you. I have told my men at the pass where you will camp, and if any of them come down the valley in the dark, and hear men where no men are supposed to be, they will shoot first and investigate later. Beside, the Khurukzai dogs, if they creep upon the crags and see men sleeping beneath them, will roll down boulders and crush you like insects."

This seemed reasonable enough, and O'Donnell had no wish to antagonize Afzal Khan. The Afghan's attitude seemed a mixture of his natural domineering arrogance and an effort at geniality. This was what might be expected, considering both the man's nature and his present obligation. O'Donnell believed that Afzal Khan begrudged the obligation, but recognized it.

"We have no tents," answered the American. "We need none. We sleep in our cloaks." And he ordered his men to dismount at the spot designated by the chief. They at once unsaddled and led their horses

to the pen, where, as the Afghan had declared, there was an abundance of fodder.

O'Donnell told off five men to guard them. Not, he hastened to explain to the frowning chief, that they feared human thieves, but there were the wolves to be considered. Afzal Khan grunted and turned his own sorry steeds into the pen, growling in his beard at the contrast they made alongside the Turkish horses.

His men showed no disposition to fraternize with the Turkomans; they entered the inclosure and presently the smoke of cooking fires arose. O'Donnell's own men set about preparing their scanty meal, and Afzal Khan came and stood over them, combing his crimson beard that the firelight turned to blood. The jeweled hilts of his knives gleamed in the glow, and his eyes burned red like the eyes of a hawk.

“Our fare is poor,” he said abruptly. “Those Khurukzai dogs burned their own huts and food stores when they fled before us. We are half starved. I can offer you no food, though you are my guests. But there is a well in the *sangar*, and I have sent some of my men to fetch some steers we have in a pen outside the valley. Tomorrow we shall all feast full, *inshallah!”*

O’Donnell murmured a polite response, but he was conscious of a vague uneasiness. Afzal Khan was acting in a most curious manner, even for a bandit who trampled all laws and customs of

conventional conduct. He gave them orders one instant and almost apologized for them in the next.

The matter of designating the camp site sounded almost as if they were prisoners, yet he had made no attempt to disarm them. His men were sullen and silent, even for bandits. But he had no reason to be hostile toward his guests, and, even if he had, why had he brought them to Khuruk when he could have wiped them out up in the hills just as easily?

“Ali el Ghazi,” Afzal Khan suddenly repeated the name. “Wherefore Ghazi? What infidel didst thou slay to earn the name?”

“The Russian, Colonel Ivan Kurovitch.” O’Donnell spoke no lie there. As Ali el Ghazi, a Kurd, he was known as the slayer of Kurovitch; the duel had occurred in one of the myriad nameless skirmishes along the border.

Afzal Khan meditated this matter for a few minutes. The firelight cast part of his features in shadow, making his expression seem even more sinister than usual. He loomed in the firelit shadows like a somber monster weighing the doom of men. Then with a grunt he turned and strode away toward the *sangar*.

III

Night had fallen. Wind moaned among the crags. Cloud masses moved across the dark vault of the night, obscuring the stars which blinked here and there, were blotted out and then reappeared, like chill points of frosty silver. The Turkomans squatted silently about their tiny fires, casting furtive glances over their shoulders.

Men of the deserts, the brooding grimness of the dark mountains daunted them; the night pressing down in the bowl of the valley dwarfed them in its immensity. They shivered at the wailing of the wind, and peered fearfully into the darkness, where, according to their superstitions, the ghosts of murdered men roamed ghoulishly. They stared bleakly at O’Donnell, in the grip of fear and paralyzing fatalism.

The grimness and desolation of the night had its effect on the American. A foreboding of disaster oppressed him. There was something about Afzal Khan he could not fathom — something unpredictable.

The man had lived too long outside the bounds of ordinary humanity to be judged by the standards of common men. In his present state of mind the bandit chief assumed monstrous proportions, like an ogre out of a fable.

O'Donnell shook himself angrily. Afzal Khan was only a man, who would die if bitten by lead or steel, like any other man. As for treachery, what would be the motive? Yet the foreboding remained.

"Tomorrow we will feast," he told his men. "Afzal Khan has said it."

They stared at him somberly, with the instincts of the black forests and the haunted steppes in their eyes which gleamed wolfishly in the firelight.

"The dead feast not," muttered one of them.

"What talk is this?" rebuked O'Donnell. "We are living men, not dead."

"We have not eaten salt with Afzal Khan," replied the Turkoman. "We camp here in the open, hemmed in by his slayers on either hand. Aie, we are already dead men. We are sheep led to the butcher."

O'Donnell stared hard at his men, startled at their voicing the vague fears that troubled him. There was no accusation of his leadership in their voices. They merely spoke their beliefs in a detached way that belied the fear in their eyes. They believed they were to die, and he was beginning to believe they were right. The fires were dying down, and there was no more fuel to build them up. Some of the men wrapped themselves in their cloaks and lay down on the hard ground. Others remained sitting cross-legged on their saddle cloths, their heads bent on their breasts.

O’Donnell rose and walked toward the first outcropping of the rocks, where he turned and stared back at the inclosure. The fires had died down there to a glow. No sound came from the sullen walls. A mental picture formed itself in his mind, resultant from his visit to the redoubt for water.

It was a bare wall inclosing a square space. At the northwest corner rose a tower. At the southwest corner there was a well. Once a tower had protected the well, but now it was fallen into ruins, so that only a hint of it remained. There was nothing else in the inclosure except a small stone hut with a thatched roof. What was in the hut he had no way of knowing. Afzal Khan had remarked that he slept alone in the tower. The chief did not trust his own men too far.

What was Afzal Khan’s game? He was not dealing straight with O’Donnell; that was obvious. Some of his evasions and pretenses were transparent; the man was not as clever as one might suppose; he was more like a bull that wins by ferocious charges.

But why should he practice deception? What had he to gain? O’Donnell had smelled meat cooking in the fortalice. There was food in the valley, then, but for some reason the Afghan had denied it. The Turkomans knew that; to them it logically suggested but one thing — he would not share the salt with men he intended to murder. But again, why?

“Ohai, Ali el Ghazi!”

At that hiss out of the darkness, O’Donnell wheeled, his big pistol jumping into his hand, his skin prickling. He strained his eyes, but saw nothing; heard only the muttering of the night wind.

“Who is it?” he demanded guardedly. “Who calls?”

“A friend! Hold your fire!”

O’Donnell saw a more solid shadow detach itself from the rocks and move toward him. With his thumb pressing back the fanged hammer of his pistol, he shoved the muzzle against the man’s belly and leaned forward to glare into the hairy face in the dim, uncertain

starlight. Even so the darkness was so thick the fellow's features were only a blur.

"Do you not know me?" whispered the man, and by his accent O'Donnell knew him for a Waziri. "I am Yar Muhammad!"

"Yar Muhammad!" Instantly the gun went out of sight and O'Donnell's hand fell on the other's bull-like shoulder. "What do you in this den of thieves?"

The man's teeth glimmered in the tangle of his beard as he grinned. *"Mashallah!* Am I not a thief, El Shirkuh?" he asked, giving O'Donnell the name by which the American, in his rightful person, was known to the Moslems. "Hast thou forgotten the old days? Even now the British would hang me, if they could catch me. But no matter. I was one of those who watch the paths in the hills.

"An hour ago I was relieved, and when I returned to the *sangar* I heard men talking of the Turkomans who camped in the valley outside, and it was said their chief was the Kurd who slew the infidel Kurovitch. So I knew it was El Shirkuh playing with doom again. Art thou mad, sahib? Death spreads his wings above thee and all thy men. Afzal Khan plots that thou seest no other sunrise."

"I was suspicious of him," muttered the American. "In the matter of food —"

"The hut in the inclosure is full of food. Why waste beef and bread on dead men? Food is scarce enough in these hills — and at dawn you die."

"But why? We saved Afzal Khan's life, and there is no feud —"

"The Jhelum will flow backward when Afzal Khan spares a man because of gratitude," muttered Yar Muhammad.

"But for what reason?"

"By Allah, sahib, are you blind? Reason? Are not fifty Turkish steeds reason enough? Are not fifty rifles with cartridges reason enough? In these hills firearms and cartridges are worth their

weight in silver, and a man will murder his brother for a matchlock. Afzal Khan is a robber, and he covets what you possess.

"These weapons and these horses would lend him great strength. He is ambitious. He would draw to him many more men, make himself strong enough at last to dispute the rule of these hills with Orkhan Bahadur. Nay, he plots some day to take Shahrazar from the Turkoman as he in his turn took it from the Uzbeks. What is the goal of every bandit in these hills, rich or poor? *Mashallah!* The treasure of Khuwarezm!"

O'Donnell was silent, visualizing that accursed hoard as a monstrous loadstone drawing all the evil passions of men from near lands and far. Now it was but an empty shadow men coveted, but they could not know it, and its evil power was as great as ever. He felt an insane desire to laugh.

The wind moaned in the dark, and Yar Muhammad's muttering voice merged eerily with it, unintelligible a yard away.

"Afzal Khan feels no obligation toward you, because you thought it was Ahmed Shah you were aiding. He did not attack you at the Pass because he knew you would slay many of his men, and he feared lest the horses take harm in the battle. Now he has you in a trap as he planned. Sixty men inside the *sangar;* a hundred more at the head of the valley. A short time before moonrise, the men among the spurs will creep down the valley and take position among these rocks. Then when the moon is well risen, so that a man may aim, they will rake you with rifle fire.

"Most of the Turkomans will die in their sleep, and such as live and seek to flee in the other direction will be shot by the men in the inclosure. These sleep now, but sentries keep watch. I slipped out over the western side and have been lying here wondering how to approach your camp without being shot for a prowler.

"Afzal Khan has plotted well. He has you in the perfect trap, with the horses well out of the range of the bullets that will slay their riders."

"So," murmured O'Donnell. "And what is your plan?"

“Plan? Allah, when did I ever have a plan? Nay, that is for you! I know these hills, and I can shoot straight and strike a good blow.” His yard-long Khyber knife thrummed as he swung it through the air. “But I only follow where wiser men lead. I heard the men talk, and I came to warn you, because once you turned an Afridi blade from my breast, and again you broke the lock on the Peshawar jail where I lay moaning for the hills!”

O’Donnell did not express his gratitude; that was not necessary. But he was conscious of a warm glow toward the hairy ruffian. Man’s treachery is balanced by man’s loyalty, at least in the barbaric hills where civilized sophistry has not crept in with its cult of time-serving.

“Can you guide us through the mountains?” asked O’Donnell.

“Nay, sahib; the horses cannot follow these paths; and these booted Turks would die on foot.”

“It is nearly two hours yet until moonrise,” O’Donnell muttered. “To saddle horses now would be to betray us. Some of us might get away in the darkness, but —”

He was thinking of the papers that were the price of his life; but it was not altogether that. Flight in the darkness would mean scattered forces, even though they cut their way out of the valley. Without his guidance the Turkomans would be hopelessly lost; such as were separated from the main command would perish miserably.

“Come with me,” he said at last, and hurried back to the men who lay about the charring embers.

At his whisper they rose like ghouls out of the blackness and clustered about him, muttering like suspicious dogs at the Waziri.

O'Donnell could scarcely make out the hawklike faces that pressed close about him. All the stars were hidden by dank clouds. The fortalice was but a shapeless bulk in the darkness, and the flanking mountains were masses of solid blackness. The whining wind drowned voices a few yards away.

"Hearken and speak not," O'Donnell ordered. "This is Yar Muhammad, a friend and a true man. We are betrayed. Afzal Khan is a dog, who will slay us for our horses. Nay, listen! In the *sangar* there is a thatched hut. I am going into the inclosure and fire that thatch. When you see the blaze, and hear my pistol speak, rush the wall. Some of you will die, but the surprise will be on our side. We must take the *sangar* and hold it against the men who will come down the valley at moonrise. It is a desperate plan, but the best that offers itself."

"Bismillah!" they murmured softly, and he heard the rasp of blades clearing their scabbards.

"This is work indeed for cold steel," he said. "You must rush the wall and swarm it while the Pathans are dazed with surprise. Send one man for the warriors at the horse pen. Be of good heart; the rest is on Allah's lap."

As he crept away in the darkness, with Yar Muhammad following him like a bent shadow, O'Donnell was aware that the attitude of the Turkomans had changed; they had wakened out of their fatalistic lethargy into fierce tension.

"If I fall," O'Donnell murmured, "will you guide these men back to Shahrazar? Orkhan Bahadur will reward you."

"Shaitan eat Orkhan Bahadur," answered Yar Muhammad. "What care I for these *Turki* dogs? It is you, not they, for whom I risk my skin."

O'Donnell had given the Waziri his rifle. They swung around the south side of the inclosure, almost crawling on their bellies. No sound came from the breastwork, no light showed. O'Donnell knew

that they were invisible to whatever eyes were straining into the darkness along the wall. Circling wide, they approached the unguarded western wall.

“Afzal Khan sleeps in the tower,” muttered Yar Muhammad, his lips close to O’Donnell’s ear. “Sleeps or pretends to sleep. The men slumber beneath the eastern wall. All the sentries lurk on that side, trying to watch the Turkomans. They have allowed the fires to die, to lull suspicion.”

“Over the wall, then,” whispered O’Donnell, rising and gripping the coping. He glided over with no more noise than the wind in the dry tamarisk, and Yar Muhammad followed him as silently. He stood in the thicker shadow of the wall, placing everything in his mind before he moved.

The hut was before him, a blob of blackness. It looked eastward and was closer to the west wall than to the other. Near it a cluster of dying coals glowed redly. There was no light in the tower, in the northwest angle of the wall.

Bidding Yar Muhammad remain near the wall, O’Donnell stole toward the embers. When he reached them he could make out the forms of the men sleeping between the hut and the east wall. It was like these hardened killers to sleep at such a time. Why not? At the word of their master they would rise and slay. Until the time came it was good to sleep. O’Donnell himself had slept, and eaten, too, among the corpses of a battlefield.

Dim figures along the wall were sentinels. They did not turn; motionless as statues they leaned on the wall staring into the darkness out of which, in the hills, anything might come.

There was a half-burned fagot lying in the embers, one end a charring stump which glowed redly. O’Donnell reached out and secured it. Yar Muhammad, watching from the wall, shivered though he knew what it was. It was as if a detached hand had appeared for an instant in the dim glow and then disappeared, and then a red point moved toward him.

“Allah!” swore the Waziri. “This blackness is that of Jehannum!”

“Softly!” O’Donnell whispered at him from the pit darkness. “Be ready; now is the beginning of happenings.”

The ember glowed and smoked as he blew cautiously upon it. A tiny tongue of flame grew, licking at the wood.

“Commend thyself to Allah!” said O’Donnell, and whirling the brand in a flaming wheel about his head, he cast it into the thatch of the hut.

There was a tense instant in which a tongue of flame flickered and crackled, and then in one hungry combustion the dry stuff leaped ablaze, and the figures of men started out of blank blackness with startling clarity. The guards wheeled, their stupid astonishment etched in the glare, and men sat up in their cloaks on the ground, gaping bewilderedly.

And O’Donnell yelled like a hungry wolf and began jerking the trigger of his pistol.

A sentinel spun on his heel and crumpled, discharging his rifle wildly in the air. Others were howling and staggering like drunken men, reeling and falling in the lurid glare. Yar Muhammad was blazing away with O’Donnell’s rifle, shooting down his former companions as cheerfully as if they were ancient enemies.

A matter of seconds elapsed between the time the blaze sprang up and the time when the men were scurrying about wildly, etched in the merciless light and unable to see the two men who crouched in the shadow of the far wall, raining them with lead. But in that scant instant there came another sound — a swift thudding of feet, the daunting sound of men rushing through the darkness in desperate haste and desperate silence.

Some of the Pathans heard it and turned to glare into the night. The fire behind them rendered the outer darkness more impenetrable. They could not see the death that was racing fleetly toward them, until the charge reached the wall.

Then a yell of terror went up as the men along the wall caught a glimpse of glittering eyes and flickering steel rushing out of the blackness. They fired one wild, ragged volley, and then the

Turkomans surged up over the wall in an irresistible wave and were slashing and hacking like madmen among the defenders.

Scarcely wakened, demoralized by the surprise, and by the bullets that cut them down from behind, the Pathans were beaten almost before the fight began. Some of them fled over the wall without any attempt at defense, but some fought, snarling and stabbing like wolves. The blazing thatch etched the scene in a lurid glare. *Kalpaks* mingled with turbans, and steel flickered over the seething mob. Yataghans grated against tulwars, and blood spurted.

His pistol empty, O'Donnell ran toward the tower. He had momentarily expected Afzal Khan to appear. But in such moments it is impossible to retain a proper estimate of time. A minute may seem like an hour, an hour like a minute. In reality, the Afghan chief came storming out of the tower just as the Turkomans came surging over the wall. Perhaps he had really been asleep, or perhaps caution kept him from rushing out sooner. Gunfire might mean rebellion against his authority.

At any rate he came roaring like a wounded bull, a rifle in his hands. O'Donnell rushed toward him, but the Afghan glared beyond him to where his swordsmen were falling like wheat under the blades of the maddened Turkomans. He saw the fight was already lost, as far as the men in the inclosure were concerned, and he sprang for the nearest wall.

O'Donnell raced to pull him down, but Afzal Khan, wheeling, fired from the hip. The American felt a heavy blow in his belly, and then he was down on the ground, with all the breath gone from him. Afzal Khan yelled in triumph, brandished his rifle, and was gone over the wall, heedless of the vengeful bullet Yar Muhammad sped after him.

The Waziri had followed O'Donnell across the inclosure and now he knelt beside him, yammering as he fumbled to find the American's wound.

“Aie!” he bawled. “He is slain! My friend and brother! Where will his like be found again? Slain by the bullet of a hillman! Aie! Aie! Aie!”

“Cease thy bellowing, thou great ox,” gasped O’Donnell, sitting up and shaking off the frantic hands. “I am unhurt.”

Yar Muhammad yelled with surprise and relief. “But the bullet, brother? He fired at point-blank range!”

“It hit my belt buckle,” grunted O’Donnell, feeling the heavy gold buckle, which was bent and dented. “By Allah, the slug drove it into my belly. It was like being hit with a sledge hammer. Where is Afzal Khan?”

“Fled away in the darkness.”

O’Donnell rose and turned his attention to the fighting. It was practically over. The remnants of the Pathans were fleeing over the wall, harried by the triumphant Turkomans, who in victory were no more merciful than the average Oriental. The *sangar* looked like a shambles.

The hut still blazed brightly, and O’Donnell knew that the contents had been ignited. What had been an advantage was now a danger, for the men at the head of the valley would be coming at full run, and in the light of the fire they could pick off the Turkomans from the darkness. He ran forward shouting orders, and setting an example of action.

Men began filling vessels — cooking pots, gourds, even *kalpaks* from the well and casting the water on the fire. O’Donnell burst in the door and began to drag out the contents of the huts, foods mostly, some of it brightly ablaze, to be doused.

Working as only men in danger of death can work, they extinguished the flame and darkness fell again over the fortress. But over the eastern crags a faint glow announced the rising of the moon through the breaking clouds.

Then followed a tense period of waiting, in which the Turkomans hugged their rifles and crouched along the wall, staring into the

darkness as the Pathans had done only a short time before. Seven of them had been killed in the fighting and lay with the wounded beside the well. The bodies of the slain Pathans had been unceremoniously heaved over the wall.

The men at the valley head could not have been on their way down the valley when the fighting broke out, and they must have hesitated before starting, uncertain as to what the racket meant. But they were on their way at last, and Afzal Khan was trying to establish a contact with them.

The wind brought snatches of shouts down the valley, and a rattle of shots that hinted at hysteria. These were followed by a furious bellowing which indicated that Afzal Khan's demoralized warriors had nearly shot their chief in the dark. The moon broke through the clouds and disclosed a straggling mob of men gesticulating wildly this side of the rocks to the east.

O'Donnell even made out Afzal Khan's bulk and, snatching a rifle from a warrior's hand, tried a long shot. He missed in the uncertain light, but his warriors poured a blast of lead into the thick of their enemies which accounted for a man or so and sent the others leaping for cover. From the reeflike rocks they began firing at the wall, knocking off chips of stone but otherwise doing no damage.

With his enemies definitely located, O'Donnell felt more at ease. Taking a torch he went to the tower, with Yar Muhammad hanging at his heels like a faithful ghoul. In the tower were heaped odds and ends of plunder — saddles, bridles, garments, blankets, food, weapons — but O'Donnell did not find what he sought, though he tore the place to pieces. Yar Muhammad squatted in the doorway, with his rifle across his knees, and watched him, it never occurring to the Waziri to inquire what his friend was searching for.

At length O'Donnell paused, sweating from the vigor of his efforts — for he had concentrated much exertion in a few minutes — and swore.

"Where *does* the dog keep those papers?"

“The papers he took from Ahmed Shah?” inquired Yar Muhammad. “Those he always carries in his girdle. He cannot read them, but he believes they are valuable. Men say Ahmed Shah had them from a *Feringi* who died.”

IV

Dawn was lifting over the valley of Khuruk. The sun that was not yet visible above the rim of the hills turned the white peaks to pulsing fire. But down in the valley there was none who found time to wonder at the changeless miracle of the mountain dawn. The cliffs rang with the flat echoes of rifle shots, and wisps of smoke drifted bluely into the air. Lead spanged on stone and whined venomously off into space, or thudded sickeningly into quivering flesh. Men howled blasphemously and fouled the morning with their frantic curses.

O’Donnell crouched at a loophole, staring at the rocks whence came puffs of white smoke and singing harbingers of death. His rifle barrel was hot to his hand, and a dozen yards from the wall lay a huddle of white-clad figures.

Since the first hint of light the wolves of Afzal Khan had poured lead into the fortalice from the reeflike ledge that broke the valley floor. Three times they had broken cover and charged, only to fall back beneath the merciless fire that raked them. Hopelessly outnumbered, the advantage of weapons and position counted heavily for the Turkomans.

O’Donnell had stationed five of the best marksmen in the tower and the rest held the walls. To reach the inclosure meant charging across several hundred yards of open space, devoid of cover. All the outlaws were still among the rocks east of the *sangar*, where, indeed, the broken ledge offered the only cover within rifle range of the redoubt.

The Pathans had suffered savagely in the charges, and they had had the worst of the long-range exchanges, both their marksmanship

and their weapons being inferior to the Turkomans'. But some of their bullets did find their way through the loopholes. A few yards from O'Donnell a *kaftaned* rider lay in a grotesque huddle, his feet turned so the growing light glinted on his silver boot heels, his head a smear of blood and brains.

Another lay sprawled near the charred hut, his ghastly face frozen in a grin of agony as he chewed spasmodically on a bullet. He had been shot in the belly and was taking a long time in dying, but not a whimper escaped his livid lips.

A fellow with a bullet hole in his forearm was making more racket; his curses, as a comrade probed for the slug with a dagger point, would have curdled the blood of a devil.

O'Donnell glanced up at the tower, whence wisps of smoke drifting told him that his five snipers were alert. Their range was greater than that of the men at the wall, and they did more damage proportionately and were better protected. Again and again they had broken up attempts to get at the horses in the stone pen. This pen was nearer the inclosure than it was to the rocks, and crumpled shapes on the ground showed of vain attempts to reach it.

But O'Donnell shook his head. They had salvaged a large quantity of food from the burning hut; there was a well of good water; they had better weapons and more ammunition than the men outside. But a long siege meant annihilation.

One of the men wounded in the night fighting had died. There remained alive forty-one men of the fifty with which he had left Shahrazar. One of these was dying, and half a dozen were wounded — one probably fatally. There were at least a hundred and fifty men outside.

Afzal Khan could not storm the walls yet. But under the constant toll of the bullets, the small force of the defenders would melt away. If any of them lived and escaped, O'Donnell knew it could be only by a swift, bold stroke. But he had no plan at all.

The firing from the valley ceased suddenly, and a white turban cloth was waved above the rock on a rifle muzzle.

“Ohai, Ali el Ghazi!” came a hail in a bull’s roar that could only have issued from Afzal Khan.

Yar Muhammad, squatting beside O’Donnell, sneered. “A trick! Keep thy head below the parapet, sahib. Trust Afzal Khan when wolves knock out their own teeth.”

“Hold your fire, Ali el Ghazi!” boomed the distant voice. “I would parley with you!”

“Show yourself!” O’Donnell yelled back.

And without hesitation a huge bulk loomed up among the rocks. Whatever his own perfidy, Afzal Khan trusted the honor of the man he thought a Kurd. He lifted his hands to show they were empty.

“Advance, alone!” yelled O’Donnell, straining to make himself heard.

Someone thrust the butt of a rifle into a crevice of the rocks so it stood muzzle upward, with the white cloth blowing out in the morning breeze, and Afzal Khan came striding over the stones with the arrogance of a sultan. Behind him turbans were poked up above the boulders.

O’Donnell halted him within good earshot, and instantly he was covered by a score of rifles. Afzal Khan did not seem to be disturbed by that, or by the blood lust in the dark hawklike faces glaring along the barrels. Then O’Donnell rose into view, and the two leaders faced one another in the full dawn.

O’Donnell expected accusations of treachery — for, after all, he had struck the first blow — but Afzal Khan was too brutally candid for such hypocrisy.

“I have you in a vise, Ali el Ghazi,” he announced without preamble. “But for that Waziri dog who crouches behind you, I would have cut your throat at moonrise last night. You are all dead men, but this siege work grows tiresome, and I am willing to forgo half my advantage. I am generous. As reward of victory I demand either your guns or your horses. Your horses I have already, but you

shall have them back, if you wish. Throw down your weapons and you may ride out of Khuruk. Or, if you wish, I will keep the horses, and you may march out on foot with your rifles. What is your answer?"

O'Donnell spat toward him with a typically Kurdish gesture. "Are we fools, to be hoodwinked by a dog with scarlet whiskers?" he snarled. "When Afzal Khan keeps his sworn word, the Indus will flow backward. Shall we ride out, unarmed, for you to cut us down in the passes, or shall we march forth on foot, for you to shoot us from ambush in the hills?

"You lie when you say you have our horses. Ten of your men have died trying to take them for you. You lie when you say you have us in the vise. It is *you* who are in the vise! You have neither food nor water; there is no other well in the valley but this. You have few cartridges, because most of your ammunition is stored in the tower, and *we* hold that."

The fury in Afzal Khan's countenance told O'Donnell that he had scored with that shot.

"If you had us helpless you would not be offering terms," O'Donnell sneered. "You would be cutting our throats, instead of trying to gull us into the open."

"Sons of sixty dogs!" swore Afzal Khan, plucking at his beard. "I will flay you all alive! I will keep you hemmed here until you die!"

"If we cannot leave the fortress, you cannot enter it," O'Donnell retorted. "Moreover you have drawn all your men but a handful from the passes, and the Khurukzai will steal upon you and cut off your heads. They are waiting, up in the hills."

Afzal Khan's involuntarily wry face told O'Donnell that the Afghan's plight was more desperate than he had hoped.

“It is a deadlock, Afzal Khan,” said O’Donnell suddenly. “There is but one way to break it.” He lifted his voice, seeing that the Pathans under the protection of the truce were leaving their coverts and drawing within earshot. “Meet me there in the open space, man to man, and decide the feud between us two, with cold steel. If I win, we ride out of Khuruk unmolested. If you win, my warriors are at your mercy.”

“The mercy of a wolf!” muttered Yar Muhammad.

O’Donnell did not reply. It was a desperate chance, but the only one. Afzal Khan hesitated and cast a searching glance at his men; that scowling hairy horde was muttering among itself. The warriors seemed ill-content, and they stared meaningly at their leader.

The inference was plain; they were weary of the fighting at which they were at a disadvantage, and they wished Afzal Khan to accept O’Donnell’s challenge. They feared a return of the Khurukzai might catch them in the open with empty cartridge pouches. After all, if their chief lost to the Kurd, they would only lose the loot they had expected to win. Afzal Khan understood this attitude, and his beard bristled to the upsurging of his ready passion.

“Agreed!” he roared, tearing out his tulwar and throwing away the scabbard. He made the bright broad steel thrum about his head. “Come over the wall and die, thou slayer of infidels!”

“Hold your men where they are!” O’Donnell ordered and vaulted the parapet.

At a bellowed order the Pathans had halted, and the wall was lined with *kalpaks* as the Turkomans watched tensely, muzzles turned upward but fingers still crooked on the triggers. Yar Muhammad followed O’Donnell over the wall, but did not advance from it; he crouched against it like a bearded ghoul, fingering his knife.

O’Donnell wasted no time. Scimitar in one hand and *kindhjal* in the other, he ran lightly toward the burly figure advancing to meet him. O’Donnell was slightly above medium height, but Afzal Khan towered half a head above him. The Afghan’s bull-like shoulders and muscular bulk contrasted with the rangy figure of the false Kurd; but O’Donnell’s sinews were like steel wires. His Arab scimitar, though neither so broad nor so heavy as the tulwar, was fully as long, and the blade was of unbreakable Damascus steel.

The men seemed scarcely within arm’s reach when the fight opened with a dazzling crackle and flash of steel. Blow followed blow so swiftly that the men watching, trained to arms since birth, could scarcely follow the strokes. Afzal Khan roared, his eyes

blazing, his beard bristling, and wielding the heavy tulwar as one might wield a camel wand, he flailed away in a frenzy.

But always the scimitar flickered before him, turning the furious blows, or the slim figure of the false Kurd avoided death by the slightest margins, with supple twists and swayings. The scimitar bent beneath the weight of the tulwar, but it did not break; like a serpent's tongue it always snapped straight again, and like a serpent's tongue it flickered at Afzal Khan's breast, his throat, his groin, a constant threat of death that reddened the Afghan's eyes with a tinge akin to madness.

Afzal Khan was a famed swordsman, and his sheer brute strength was more than a man's. But O'Donnell's balance and economy of motion was a marvel to witness. He never set a foot wrong or made a false motion; he was always poised, always a threat, even in retreat, beaten backward by the bull-like rushes of the Afghan. Blood trickled down his face where a furious stroke, beating down his blade, had bitten through his silk turban and into the scalp, but the flame in his blue eyes never altered.

Afzal Khan was bleeding, too. O'Donnell's point, barely missing his jugular, had plowed through his beard and along his jaw. Blood dripping from his beard made his aspect more fearsome than ever. He roared and flailed, until it seemed that the fury of his onslaught would overbalance O'Donnell's perfect mastery of himself and his blade.

Few noticed, however, that O'Donnell had been working his way in closer and closer under the sweep of the tulwar. Now he caught a furious swipe near the hilt and the *kindhjal* in his left hand licked in and out. Afzal Khan's bellow caught in a gasp. There was but that fleeting instant of contact, so brief it was like blur of movement, and then O'Donnell, at arm's length again, was slashing and parrying, but now there was a thread of crimson on the narrow *kindhjal* blade, and blood was seeping in a steady stream through Afzal Khan's broad girdle.

There was the pain and desperation of the damned in the Afghan's eyes, in his roaring voice. He began to weave drunkenly, but he attacked more madly than ever, like a man fighting against time.

His strokes ribboned the air with bright steel and thrummed past O'Donnell's ears like a wind of death, until the tulwar rang full against the scimitar's guard with hurricane force and O'Donnell went to his knee under the impact. "Kurdish dog!" It was a gasp of frenzied triumph. Up flashed the tulwar and the watching hordes gave tongue. But again the *kindhjal* licked out like a serpent's tongue — outward and upward.

The stroke was meant for the Afghan's groin, but a shift of his legs at the instant caused the keen blade to plow through his thigh instead, slicing veins and tendons. He lurched sidewise, throwing out his arm to balance himself. And even before men knew whether he would fall or not, O'Donnell was on his feet and slashed with the scimitar at his head.

Afzal Khan fell as a tree falls, blood gushing from his head. Even so, the terrible vitality of the man clung to life and hate. The tulwar fell from his hand, but, catching himself on his knees, he plucked a knife from his girdle; his hand went back for the throw — then the knife slipped from his nerveless fingers and he crumpled to the earth and lay still.

There was silence, broken by a strident yell from the Turkomans. O'Donnell sheathed his scimitar, sprang swiftly to the fallen giant and thrust a hand into his blood-soaked girdle. His fingers closed on what had hoped to find, and he drew forth an oilskin-bound packet of papers. A low cry of satisfaction escaped his lips.

In the tense excitement of the fight, neither he nor the Turkomans had noticed that the Pathans had drawn nearer and nearer, until they stood in a ragged semicircle only a few yards away. Now, as O'Donnell stood staring at the packet, a hairy ruffian ran at his back, knife lifted.

A frantic yell from Yar Muhammad warned O'Donnell. There was no time to turn; sensing rather than seeing his assailant, the

American ducked deeply and the knife flashed past his ear, the muscular forearm falling on his shoulder with such force that again he was knocked to his knees.

Before the man could strike again Yar Muhammad's yard-long knife was driven into his breast with such fury that the point sprang out between his shoulder blades. Wrenching his blade free as the wretch fell, the Waziri grabbed a handful of O'Donnell's garments and began to drag him toward the wall, yelling like a madman.

It had all happened in a dizzying instant, the charge of the Pathan, Yar Muhammad's leap and retreat. The other Pathans rushed in, howling like wolves, and the Waziri's blade made a fan of steel about him and O'Donnell. Blades were flashing on all sides; O'Donnell was cursing like a madman as he strove to halt Yar Muhammad's headlong progress long enough to get to his feet, which was impossible at the rate he was being yanked along.

All he could see was hairy legs, and all he could hear was a devil's din of yells and clanging knives. He hewed sidewise at the legs and men howled, and then there was a deafening reverberation, and a blast of lead at close range smote the attackers and mowed them down like wheat. The Turkomans had waked up and gone into action.

Yar Muhammad was berserk. With his knife dripping red and his eyes blazing madly he swarmed over the wall and down on the other side, all asprawl, lugging O'Donnell like a sack of grain, and still unaware that his friend was not fatally wounded.

The Pathans were at his heels, not to be halted so easily this time. The Turkomans fired point-blank into their faces, but they came on, snarling, snatching at the rifle barrels poked over the wall, stabbing upward.

Yar Muhammad, heedless of the battle raging along the wall, was crouching over O'Donnell, mouthing, so crazy with blood lust and fighting frenzy that he was hardly aware of what he was doing, tearing at O'Donnell's clothing in his efforts to discover the wound he was convinced his friend had received.

He could hardly be convinced otherwise by O'Donnell's lurid blasphemy, and then he nearly strangled the American in a frantic embrace of relief and joy. O'Donnell threw him off and leaped to the wall, where the situation was getting desperate for the Turkomans. The Pathans, fighting without leadership, were massed in the middle of the east wall, and the men in the tower were pouring a devastating fire into them, but the havoc was being wreaked in the rear of the horde. The men in the tower feared to shoot at the attackers along the wall for fear of hitting their own comrades.

As O'Donnell reached the wall, the Turkoman nearest him thrust his muzzle into a snarling, bearded face and pulled the trigger, blasting the hillman's head into a red ruin. Then before he could fire again a knife licked over the wall and disemboweled him. O'Donnell caught the rifle as it fell, smashed the butt down on the head of a hillman climbing over the parapet, and left him hanging dead across the wall.

It was all confusion and smoke and spurting blood and insanity. No time to look right or left to see if the Turkomans still held the wall on either hand. He had his hands full with the snarling bestial faces which rose like a wave before him. Crouching on the firing step, he drove the blood-clotted butt into these wolfish faces until a rabid-eyed giant grappled him and bore him back and over.

They struck the ground on the inside, and O'Donnell's head hit a fallen gun stock with a stunning crack. In the moment that his brain swam dizzily the Pathan heaved him underneath, yelled stridently and lifted a knife — then the straining body went suddenly limp, and O'Donnell's face was spattered with blood and brains, as Yar Muhammad split the man's head to the teeth with his Khyber knife.

The Waziri pulled the corpse off and O'Donnell staggered up, slightly sick, and presenting a ghastly spectacle with his red-dabbled face, hands, and garments. The firing, which had lulled while the fighting locked along the wall, now began again. The disorganized

Pathans were falling back, were slinking away, breaking and fleeing toward the rocks.

The Turkomans had held the wall, but O'Donnell swore sickly as he saw the gaps in their ranks. One lay dead in a huddle of dead Pathans outside the wall, and five more hung motionless across the wall, or were sprawled on the ground inside. With these latter were the corpses of four Pathans, to show how desperate the brief fight had been. The number of the dead outside was appalling.

O'Donnell shook his dizzy head, shuddering slightly at the thought of how close to destruction his band had been; if the hillmen had had a leader, had kept their wits about them enough to have divided forces and attacked in several places at once — but it takes a keen mind to think in the madness of such a battle. It had been blind, bloody, and furious, and the random-cast dice of fate had decided for the smaller horde.

The Pathans had taken to the rocks again and were firing in a half-hearted manner. Sounds of loud argument drifted down the wind. He set about dressing the wounded as best he could, and while he was so employed, the Pathans tried to get at the horses again. But the effort was without enthusiasm, and a fusillade from the tower drove them back.

As quickly as he could, O'Donnell retired to a corner of the wall and investigated the oilskin-wrapped packet he had taken from Afzal Khan. It was a letter, several sheets of high-grade paper covered with a fine scrawl. The writing was Russ, not *Urdu*, and there were English margin notes in a different hand. These notes made clear points suggested in the letter, and O'Donnell's face grew grim as he read.

How the unknown English secret-service man who had added those notes had got possession of the letter there was no way of knowing; but it had been intended for the man called Suleiman Pasha, and it revealed what O'Donnell had suspected — a plot within a plot; a red and sinister conspiracy concealing itself in a guise of international policy.

Suleiman Pasha was not only a foreign spy; he was a traitor to the men he served. And the tentacles of the plot which revolved about him stretched incredibly southward into high places. O'Donnell swore softly as he read there the names of men trusted by the government they pretended to serve. And slowly a realization crystallized — this letter must never reach Suleiman Pasha. Somehow, in some way, he, Kirby O'Donnell, must carry on the work of that unknown Englishman who had died with his task uncompleted. That letter must go southward, to lay bare black treachery spawning under the heedless feet of government. He hastily concealed the packet as the Waziri approached.

Yar Muhammad grinned. He had lost a tooth, and his black beard was streaked and clotted with blood which did not make him look any less savage.

"The dogs wrangle with one another," he said. "It is always thus; only the hand of Afzal Khan kept them together. Now men who followed him will refuse to follow one of their own number. They fear the Khurukzai. We also have reason to beware of them. They will be waiting in the hills beyond the Pass of Akbar."

O'Donnell realized the truth of this statement. He believed a handful of Pathans yet held the tower in the pass, but there was no reason to suppose they would not desert their post now that Afzal Khan was dead. Men trooping down out of the hills told him that the footpaths were no longer guarded. At any time Khurukzai scouts might venture back, learn what was going on, and launch an attack in force.

The day wore on, hot, and full of suffering for the wounded in the in closure. Only a desultory firing came from the rocks, where continual squabbling seemed to be going on. No further attack was made, and presently Yar Muhammad grunted with gratification.

From the movement among the rocks and beyond them, it was evident that the leaderless outlaw band was breaking up. Men slunk away up the valley, singly or in small bands. Others fought over horses, and one group turned and fired a volley at their former

companions before they disappeared among the spurs at the head of the valley. Without a chieftain they trusted, demoralized by losses, short of water and food and ammunition, and in fear of reprisals, the outlaw band melted away, and within an hour from the time the first bolted, the valley of Khuruk was empty except for O'Donnell's men.

To make sure the retreat was real, O'Donnell secured his horse from the pen and, with Yar Muhammad, rode cautiously to the valley head. The spurs were empty. From the tracks the American believed that the bandits had headed southward, preferring to make their way through the pathless hills rather than fight their way through the vengeful Khurukzai who in all probability still lurked among the crags beyond the Pass of Akbar.

He had to consider these men himself, and he grinned wryly at the twist of fate which had made enemies of the very men he had sought in friendship. But life ran that way in the hills.

"Go back to the Turkomans," he requested Yar Muhammad. "Bid them saddle their horses. Tie the wounded into the saddles, and load the spare horses with food and skins of water. We have plenty of spare horses now, because of the men who were slain. It is dusk now, and time we were on our way.

"We shall take our chance on the trails in the dark, for now that the hill paths are unguarded, assuredly the Khurukzai will be stealing back, and I expect an attack on the valley by moonrise, at the latest. Let them find it empty. Perhaps we can make our way through the Pass and be gone while they are stealing through the hills to the attack. At least we will make the attempt and leave the rest to Allah."

Yar Muhammad grinned widely — the prospect of any sort of action seemed to gratify him immensely — and reined his horse down the valley, evidencing all the pride that becomes a man who rides a blooded Turkish steed. O'Donnell knew he could leave the preparations for the journey with him and the Turkomans.

The American dismounted, tied his horse and strode through the rocky spurs to the point where the trail wound out of them and along a boulder-littered narrow level between two slopes. Dusk was gathering, but he could see any body of men that tried to come along that trail.

But he was not expecting attack by that route. Not knowing just what had taken place in the valley, the Khurukzai, even if the men in the tower had deserted it, would be too suspicious to follow the obvious road. And it was not attack of any sort that was worrying him.

He took the packet of papers from his girdle and stared at it. He was torn by indecision. There were documents that needed desperately to get to the British outposts. It was almost sheer suicide for one man to start through the hills, but two men, with food and water, might make it.

He could take Yar Muhammad, load an extra horse or two with provisions, and slip away southward. Then let Suleiman Pasha do his worst with Orkhan Bahadur. Long before the emissary could learn of his flight, he and the Waziri would be far out of the vengeful Turkoman's reach. But, then, what of the warriors back there in the *sangar*, making ready for their homeward flight, with implicit trust in Ali el Ghazi?

They had followed him blindly, obeyed his every order, demonstrated their courage and faithfulness beyond question. If he deserted them now, they were doomed. They could never make their way back through the hills without him. Such as were not lost to die of starvation would be slaughtered by the vengeful Khurukzai who would not forget their defeat by these dark-skinned riders.

Sweat started out on O'Donnell's skin in the agony of his mental struggle. Not even for the peace of all India could he desert these men who trusted him. He was their leader. His first duty was to them.

But, then, what of that damning letter? It supplied the key to Suleiman Pasha's plot. It told of hell brewing in the Khyber Hills, of

revolt seething on the Hindu plains, of a plot which might be nipped in the bud were the British officials to learn of it in time. But if he returned to Shahrazar with the Turkomans, he must give the letter to Suleiman Pasha or be denounced to Orkhan — and that meant torture and death. He was in the fangs of the vise; he must either sacrifice himself, his men, or the helpless people of India.

"Ohai, Ali el Ghazi!" It was a soft hiss behind him, from the shadow of a jutting rock. Even as he started about, a pistol muzzle was pressed against his back.

"Nay, do not move. I do not trust you yet."

Twisting his head about, O'Donnell stared into the dark features of Suleiman Pasha.

"You! How in Shaitan's name —"

"No matter. Give me the papers which you hold in your hand. Give them to me, or, by Allah, I will send you to hell, Kurd!"

With the pistol boring into his back, there was nothing else O'Donnell could do, his heart almost bursting with rage.

Suleiman Pasha stepped back and tucked the papers into his girdle. He allowed O'Donnell to turn and face him, but still kept him covered with the pistol.

"After you had departed," he said, "secret word came to me from the North that the papers for which I sent you were more important then I had dreamed. I dared not wait in Shahrazar for your return, lest something go awry. I rode for Khuruk with some Ghilzais who knew the road. Beyond the Pass of Akbar we were ambushed by the very people we sought. They slew my men, but they spared me, for I was known to one of their headmen. They told me they had been driven forth by Afzal Khan, and I guessed what else had occurred. They said there had been fighting beyond the Pass, for they had heard the sound of firing, but they did not know its nature. There are no men in the tower in the Pass, but the Khurukzai fear a trap. They do not know the outlaws have fled from the valley.

“I wished to get word with you as soon as possible, so I volunteered to go spying for them alone, so they showed me the footpaths. I reached the valley head in time to see the last of the Pathans depart, and I have been hiding here awaiting a chance to catch you alone. Listen! The Turkomans are doomed. The Khurukzai mean to kill them all. But I can save you. We shall dress you in the clothing of a dead Pathan, and I shall say you are a servant of mine who has escaped from the Turkomans.

“I shall not return to Shahrazar. I have business in the Khyber region. I can use a man like you. We shall return to the Khurukzai and show them how to attack and destroy the Turkomans. Then they will lend us an escort southward. Will you come with me and serve me, Kurd?”

“No, you damned swine!” In the stress of the moment O’Donnell spat his fury in English. Suleiman Pasha’s jaw dropped, in the staggering unexpectedness of English words from a man he thought to be a Kurd. And in the instant his wits were disrupted by the discovery, O’Donnell, nerved to desperate quickness, was at his throat like a striking cobra.

The pistol exploded once and then was wrenched from the numbed fingers. Suleiman Pasha was fighting in frenzied silence, and he was all steel strings and catlike thews. But O’Donnell’s *kindhjal* was out and ripping murderously into him again and again. They went to the earth together in the shadow of the big rock, O’Donnell stabbing in a berserk frenzy; and then he realized that he was driving his blade into a dead man.

He shook himself free and rose, staggering like a drunken man with the red maze of his murder lust. The oilskin packet was in his left hand, torn from his enemy’s garments during the struggle. Dusk had given way to blue, star-flecked darkness. To O’Donnell’s ears came the clink of hoofs on stone, the creak of leather. His warriors were approaching, still hidden by the towering ledges. He heard a low laugh that identified Yar Muhammad.

O’Donnell breathed deeply in vast content. Now he could guide his men back through the passes to Shahrazar without fear of Orkhan Bahadur, who would never know his secret. He could persuade the Turkoman chief that it would be to his advantage to send this letter on to the British border. He, as Ali el Ghazi, could remain in Shahrazar safely, to oppose subtly what other conspirators came plotting to the forbidden city.

He smiled as he wiped the blood from his *kindhjal* and sheathed it. There still remained the Khurukzai, waiting with murderous patience beyond the Pass of Akbar, but his soul was at rest, and the prospect of fighting his way back through the mountains troubled him not at all. He was as confident of the outcome as if he already sat in the palace at Shahrazar.

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The Trail of the Blood-Stained God

I
In the Alley of Satan

It was dark as the Pit in that evil-smelling Afghan alley down which Kirby O'Donnell, in his disguise of a swashbuckling Kurd, was groping, on a quest as blind as the darkness which surrounded him. It was a sharp, pain-edged cry smiting his ears that changed the whole course of events for him. Cries of agony were no uncommon sound in the twisting alleys of Medina el Harami, the City of Thieves, and no cautious or timid man would think of interfering in an affair which was none of his business. But O'Donnell was neither cautious nor timid, and something in his wayward Irish soul would not let him pass by a cry for help.

Obeying his instincts, he turned toward a beam of light that lanced the darkness close at hand, and an instant later was peering through a crack in the close-drawn shutters of a window in a thick stone wall. What he saw drove a red throb of rage through his brain,

though years of adventuring in the raw lands of the world should have calloused him by this time. But O'Donnell could never grow callous to inhuman torture.

He was looking into a broad room, hung with velvet tapestries and littered with costly rugs and couches. About one of these couches a group of men clustered — seven brawny Yusufzai bravos, and two more who eluded identification. On that couch another man was stretched out, a Waziri tribesman, naked to the waist. He was a powerful man, but a ruffian as big and muscular as himself gripped each wrist and ankle. Between the four of them they had him spread-eagled on the couch, unable to move, though the muscles stood out in quivering knots on his limbs and shoulders. His eyes gleamed redly, and his broad breast glistened with sweat. There was a good reason. As O'Donnell looked, a supple man in a red silk turban lifted a glowing coal from a smoking brazier with a pair of silver tongs, and poised it over the quivering breast, already scarred from similar torture.

Another man, taller than the one with the red turban, snarled a question O'Donnell could not understand. The Waziri shook his head violently and spat savagely at the questioner. An instant later the red-hot coal dropped full on the hairy breast, wrenching an inhuman bellow from the sufferer. And, in that instant O'Donnell launched his full weight against the shutters.

The Irish-American was not a big man, but he was all steel and whalebone. The shutters splintered inward with a crash, and he hit the floor inside feet-first, scimitar in one hand and *kindhjal* in the other. The torturers whirled and yelped in astonishment.

They saw him as a masked, mysterious figure, for he was clad in the garments of a Kurd, with a fold of his flowing *kafiyeh* drawn about his face. Over his mask his eyes blazed like hot coals, paralyzing them. But only for an instant the scene held, frozen, and then melted into ferocious action.

The man in the red turban snapped a quick word and a hairy giant lunged to meet the oncoming intruder. The Yusufzai held a

three-foot Khyber knife low, and as he charged he ripped murderously upward. But the downward-lashing scimitar met the upward plunging wrist. The hand, still gripping the knife, flew from that wrist in a shower of blood, and the long, narrow blade in O'Donnell's left hand sliced through the knifeman's bull throat, choking the grunt of agony.

Over the crumpling corpse the American leaped at Red Turban and his tall companion. He did not fear the use of firearms. Shots ringing out by night in this Alley of Shaitan were sure to be investigated, and none of the inhabitants of the Alley desired official investigation.

He was right. Red Turban drew a knife, the tall man a sabre.

"Cut him down, Jallad!" snarled Red Turban, retreating before the American's impetuous onslaught. "Achmet, help here!"

The man called Jallad, which means Executioner, parried O'Donnell's slash and cut back. O'Donnell avoided the swipe with a shift that would have shamed the leap of a starving panther, and the same movement brought him within reach of Red Turban who was sneaking in with his knife. Red Turban yelped and leaped back, so narrowly avoiding O'Donnell's *kindhjal* that the lean blade slit his silken vest and the skin beneath. He tripped over a stool and fell sprawling, but before O'Donnell could follow up his advantage, Jallad was towering over him, raining blows with his sabre. There was power as well as skill in the tall man's arm, and for an instant O'Donnell was on the defensive.

But as he parried the lightning-like strokes, the American saw that the Yusufzai Red Turban had called Achmet was advancing, gripping an old Tower musket by the barrel. One smash of the heavy, brass-bound butt would crush a man's head like an egg. Red Turban was scrambling to his feet, and in an instant O'Donnell would find himself hemmed in on three sides.

He did not wait to be surrounded. A flashing swipe of his scimitar, barely parried in time, drove Jallad back on his heels, and O'Donnell whirled like a startled cat and sprang at Achmet. The

Yusufzai bellowed and lifted the musket, but the blinding swiftness of the attack had caught him off-guard. Before the blow could fall he was down, writhing in his own blood and entrails, his belly ripped wide open.

Jallad yelled savagely and rushed at O'Donnell, but the American did not await the attack.

There was no one between him and the Waziri on the couch. He leaped straight for the four men who still gripped the prisoner. They let go of the man, shouting with alarm, and drew their tulwars. One struck viciously at the Waziri, but the man rolled off the couch, evading the blow. The next instant O'Donnell was between him and them. They began hacking at the American, who retreated before them, snarling at the Waziri: "Get out! Ahead of me! Quick!"

"Dogs!" screamed Red Turban as he and Jallad rushed across the room. "Don't let them escape!"

"Come and taste of death thyself, dog!" O'Donnell laughed wildly, above the clangor of steel. But even in the hot passion of battle he remembered to speak with a Kurdish accent.

The Waziri, weak and staggering from the torture he had undergone, slid back a bolt and threw open a door. It gave upon a small enclosed court.

"Go!" snapped O'Donnell. "Over the wall while I hold them back!"

He turned in the doorway, his blades twin tongues of death-edged steel. The Waziri ran stumblingly across the court and the men in the room flung themselves howling at O'Donnell. But in the narrow door their very numbers hindered them. He laughed and cursed them as he parried and thrust. Red Turban was dancing around behind the milling, swearing mob, calling down all the curses in his vocabulary on the thievish Kurd! Jallad was trying to get a clean swipe at O'Donnell, but his own men were in the way. Then O'Donnell's scimitar licked out and under a flailing tulwar like the tongue of a cobra, and a Yusufzai, feeling chill steel in his vitals, shrieked and fell dying. Jallad, lunging with a full-arm reach, tripped over the writhing figure and fell. Instantly the door was

jammed with squirming, cursing figures, and before they could untangle themselves, O'Donnell turned and ran swiftly across the yard toward the wall over which the Waziri had already disappeared.

O'Donnell leaped and caught the coping, swung himself up, and had one glimpse of a black, winding street outside. Then something smashed sickeningly against his head. It was a stool, snatched by Jallad and hurled with vindictive force and aim, as O'Donnell was momentarily outlined against the stars. But O'Donnell did not know what had hit him, for with the impact came oblivion. Limply and silently he toppled from the wall into the shadowy street below.

II
Paths of Suspicion

It was the tiny glow of a flashlight in his face that roused O'Donnell from his unconsciousness. He sat up, blinking, and cursed, groping for his sword. Then the light was snapped off and in the ensuing darkness a voice spoke: "Be at ease, Ali el Ghazi. I am your friend."

"Who the devil are you?" demanded O'Donnell. He had found his scimitar, lying on the ground near him, and now he stealthily gathered his legs under him for a sudden spring. He was in the street at the foot of the wall from which he had fallen, and the other man was but a dim bulk looming over him in the shadowy starlight.

"Your friend," repeated the other. He spoke with a Persian accent. "One who knows the name you call yourself. Call me Hassan. It is as good a name as another."

O'Donnell rose, scimitar in hand, and the Persian extended something toward him. O'Donnell caught the glint of steel in the starlight, but before he could strike as he intended, he saw that it was his own *kindhjal* Hassan had picked up from the ground and was offering him, hilt first.

"You are as suspicious as a starving wolf, Ali el Ghazi," laughed Hassan. "But save your steel for your enemies."

“Where are they?” demanded O’Donnell, taking the *kindhjal*.

“Gone. Into the mountains. *On the trail of the blood-stained god.”*

O’Donnell started violently. He caught the Persian’s *khalat* in an iron grip and glared fiercely into the man’s dark eyes, mocking and mysterious in the starlight.

“Damn you, what do you know of the blood-stained god?” His *kindhjal’s* sharp point just touched the Persian’s skin below his ribs.

“I know this,” said Hassan imperturbably. “I know you came to Medina el Harami following thieves who stole from you the map of a treasure greater than Akbar’s Hoard. I too came seeking something. I was hiding nearby, watching through a hole in the wall, when you burst into the room where the Waziri was being tortured. How did you know it was they who stole your map?”

“I didn’t!” muttered O’Donnell. “I heard the man cry out, and turned aside to stop the torture. If I’d known *they* were the men I was hunting — listen, how much *do* you know?”

“This much,” said Hassan. “In the mountains not far from this city, but hidden in an almost inaccessible place, there is an ancient heathen temple which the hill-people fear to enter. The region is forbidden to *Ferengi*, but one Englishman, named Pembroke, *did* find the temple, by accident, and entering it, found an idol crusted with red jewels, which he called the Blood-Stained God. He could not bring it away with him, but he made a map, intending to return. He got safely away, but was stabbed by a fanatic in Kabul and died there. But before he died he gave the map to a Kurd named Ali el Ghazi.”

“Well?” demanded O’Donnell grimly. The house behind him was dark and still. There was no other sound in the shadowy street except the whisper of the wind and the low murmur of their voices.

“The map was stolen,” said Hassan. “By whom, you know.”

“I didn’t know at the time,” growled O’Donnell. “Later I learned the thieves were an Englishman named Hawklin and a disinherited Afghan prince named Jehungir Khan. Some skulking servant spied

on Pembroke as he lay dying, and told them. I didn't know either of them by sight, but I managed to trace them to this city. Tonight I learned they were hiding somewhere in the Alley of Shaitan. I was blindly searching for a clue to their hiding-place when I stumbled into that brawl."

"You fought them without knowing they were the men you sought!" said Hassan. "The Waziri was one Yar Muhammad, a spy of Yakub Khan, the Jowaki outlaw chief. They recognized him, tricked him into their house and were burning him to make him tell them the secret trails through the mountains known only to Yakub's spies. Then you came, and you know the rest."

"All except what happened when I climbed the wall," said O'Donnell.

"Somebody threw a stool," replied Hassan. "When you fell beyond the wall they paid no more attention to you, either thinking you were dead, or not having recognized you because of your mask. They chased the Waziri, but whether they caught and killed him, or he got away, I don't know. I do know that after a short chase they returned, saddled horses in great haste and set out westward, leaving the dead men where they fell. I came and uncovered your face, then, to see who you were, and recognized you."

"Then the man in the red turban was Jehungir Khan," muttered O'Donnell. "But where was Hawklin?"

"He was disguised as an Afghan — the man they called Jallad, the Executioner, because he has killed so many men."

"I never dreamed 'Jallad' was a *Ferengi,"* growled O'Donnell.

"Not all men are what they seem," said Hassan casually. "I happen to know, for instance, that you are no Kurd at all, but an American named Kirby O'Donnell."

Silence held for a brief tick of time, in which life and death poised on a hair trigger.

"And what then?" O'Donnell's voice was soft and deadly as a cobra's hiss.

“Nothing! Like you I want the red god. That’s why I followed Hawklin here. But I can’t fight his gang alone. Neither can you. But we can join forces. Let us follow those thieves and take the idol away from them!”

“All right,” O’Donnell made a quick decision. “But I’ll kill you if you try any tricks, Hassan!”

“Trust me!” answered Hassan. “Come. I have horses at the *serai* — better than the steed which brought you into this city of thieves.”

The Persian led the way through narrow, twisting streets, overhung with latticed balconies, and along winding, ill-smelling alleys, until he stopped at the lamp-lit door of an enclosed courtyard. At his knock a bearded face appeared at the wicket, and following a few muttered words the gate swung open. Hassan entered confidently, and O’Donnell followed suspiciously. He half expected a trap of some sort; he had many enemies in Afghanistan, and Hassan was a stranger. But the horses were there, and a word from the keeper of the *serai* set sleepy servants to saddling them, and filling capacious saddle-pouches with packets of food. Hassan brought out a pair of high-powered rifles and a couple of well-filled cartridge belts.

A short time later they were riding together out of the west gate, perfunctorily challenged by the sleepy guard. Men came and went at all hours in Medina el Harami. (It goes by another name on the maps, but men swear the ancient Moslem name fits it best.)

Hassan the Persian was portly but muscular, with a broad, shrewd face and dark, alert eyes. He handled his rifle expertly, and a scimitar hung from his hip. O’Donnell knew he would fight with cunning and courage when driven to bay. And he also knew just how far he could trust Hassan. The Persian adventurer would play fair just so long as the alliance was to his advantage. But if the occasion rose when he no longer needed O’Donnell’s help, he would not hesitate to murder his partner if he could, so as to have the entire treasure for himself. Men of Hassan’s type were ruthless as a king cobra.

Hawklin was a cobra too, but O'Donnell did not shrink from the odds against them — five well-armed and desperate men. Wit and cold recklessness would even the odds when the time came.

Dawn found them riding through rugged defiles, with frowning slopes shouldering on either hand, and presently Hassan drew rein, at a loss. They had been following a well-beaten road, but now the marks of hoofs turned sharply aside and vanished on the bare rocky floor of a wide plateau.

"Here they left the road," said Hassan. "Thus was Hawklin's steed shod. But we cannot trace them over those bare rocks. You studied the map when you had it — how lies our route from here?"

O'Donnell shook his head, exasperated at this unexpected frustration.

"The map's an enigma, and I didn't have it long enough to puzzle it out. The main landmark, which locates an old trail that runs to the temple, should be somewhere near this point. But it's indicated on the map as 'Akbar's Castle.' I never heard of such a castle, or the ruins of any such castle — in these parts or anywhere else."

"Look!" exclaimed Hassan, his eyes blazing, as he started up in his stirrups, and pointed toward a great bare crag that jutted against the skyline some miles to the west of them. "That is Akbar's Castle! It is now called the Crag of Eagles, but in old times they called it Akbar's Castle! I have read of it in an old, obscure manuscript! Somehow Pembroke knew that and called it by its old name to baffle meddlers! Come on! Jehungir Khan must have known that too. We're only an hour behind them, and our horses are better than theirs."

O'Donnell took the lead, cudgelling his memory to recall the details of the stolen map. Skirting the base of the crag to the southwest, he took an imaginary line from its summit to three peaks forming a triangle far to the south. Then he and Hassan rode westward in a slanting course. Where their course intersected the imaginary line, they came on the faint traces of an old trail, winding high up into the bare mountains. The map had not lied and

O’Donnell’s memory had not failed them. The droppings of horses indicated that a party of riders had passed along the dim trail recently. Hassan asserted it was Hawklin’s party, and O’Donnell agreed.

“They set their course by Akbar’s Castle, just as we did. We’re closing the gap between us. But we don’t want to crowd them too close. They outnumber us. It’s up to us to stay out of sight until they get the idol. Then we ambush them and take it away from them.”

Hassan’s eyes gleamed; such strategy was joy to his Oriental nature.

“But we must be wary,” he said. “From here on the country is claimed by Yakub Khan, who robs all he catches. Had they known the hidden paths, they might have avoided him. Now they must trust to luck not to fall into his hands. And we must be alert, too! Yakub Khan is no friend of mine, and he hates Kurds!”

III
Swords of the Crags

Mid-afternoon found them still following the dim path that meandered endlessly on — obviously the trace of an ancient, forgotten road.

“If that Waziri got back to Yakub Khan,” said Hassan, as they rode toward a narrow gorge that opened in the frowning slopes that rose about them, “the Jowakis will be unusually alert for strangers. Yar Muhammad didn’t suspect Hawklin’s real identity, though, and didn’t learn what he was after. Yakub won’t know, either. I believe he knows where the temple is, but he’s too superstitious to go near it. Afraid of ghosts. He doesn’t know about the idol. Pembroke was the only man who’d entered that temple in Allah only knows how many centuries. I heard the story from his servant who was dying in Peshawur from a snake bite. Hawklin, Jehungir Khan, you and I are the only men alive who know about the god —”

They reined up suddenly as a lean, hawk-faced Pathan rode out of the gorge mouth ahead of them.

“Halt!” he called imperiously, riding toward them with an empty hand lifted. “By what authority do you ride in the territory of Yakub Khan?”

“Careful,” muttered O’Donnell. “He’s a Jowaki. There may be a dozen rifles trained on us from those rocks right now.”

“I’ll give him money,” answered Hassan under his breath. “Yakub Khan claims the right to collect toll from all who travel through his country. Maybe that’s all this fellow wants.”

To the tribesman he said, fumbling in his girdle: “We are but poor travellers, who are glad to pay the toll justly demanded by your brave chief. We ride alone.”

“Then who is that behind you?” harshly demanded the Jowaki, nodding his head in the direction from which they had come. Hassan, for all his wariness, half turned his head, his hand still outstretched with the coins. And in that instant fierce triumph flamed in the dark face of the Jowaki, and in one motion quick as

the lunge of a cobra, he whipped a dagger from his girdle and struck at the unsuspecting Persian.

But quick as he was, O'Donnell was quicker, sensing the trap laid for them. As the dagger darted at Hassan's throat, O'Donnell's scimitar flashed in the sun and steel rang loud on steel. The dagger flew from the Pathan's hand, and with a snarl he caught at the rifle butt which jutted from his saddle-scabbard. Before he could drag the gun free, O'Donnell struck again, cleaving the turban and the skull beneath. The Jowaki's horse neighed and reared, throwing the corpse headlong, and O'Donnell wrenched his own steed around.

"Ride for the gorge!" he yelled. "It's an ambush!"

The brief fight had occupied a mere matter of moments. Even as the Jowaki tumbled to the earth, rifle shots ripped out from the boulders on the slopes. Hassan's horse leaped convulsively and bolted for the mouth of the defile, spattering blood at each stride. O'Donnell felt flying lead tug at his sleeve as he struck in the spurs and fled after the fleeing Persian who was unable to regain control of his pain-maddened beast.

As they swept toward the mouth of the gorge, three horsemen rode out to meet them, proven swordsmen of the Jowaki clan, swinging their broad-bladed tulwars. Hassan's crazed mount was carrying him full into their teeth, and the Persian fought in vain to check him. Suddenly abandoning the effort he dragged his rifle from its boot and started firing point-blank as he came on. One of the oncoming horses stumbled and fell, throwing its rider. Another rider threw up his arms and toppled earthward. The third man hacked savagely at Hassan as the maddened horse raced past, but the Persian ducked beneath the sweeping blade and fled on into the gorge.

The next instant O'Donnell was even with the remaining swordsman, who spurred at him, swinging the heavy tulwar. The American threw up his scimitar and the blades met with a deafening crash as the horses came together breast to breast. The tribesman's horse reeled to the impact, and O'Donnell rose in his stirrups and

smiting downward with all his strength, beat down the lifted tulwar and split the skull of the wielder. An instant later the American was galloping on into the gorge. He half expected it to be full of armed warriors, but there was no other choice. Outside bullets were raining after him, splashing on rocks and ripping into stunted trees.

But evidently the man who set the trap had considered the marksmen hidden among the rocks on the slopes sufficient, and had posted only those four warriors in the gorge, for, as O'Donnell swept into it he saw only Hassan ahead of him. A few yards on the wounded horse stumbled and went down, and the Persian leaped clear as it fell.

"Get up behind me!" snapped O'Donnell, pulling up, and Hassan, rifle in hand, leaped up behind the saddle. A touch of the spurs and the heavily burdened horse set off down the gorge. Savage yells behind them indicated that the tribesmen outside were scampering to their horses, doubtless hidden behind the first ridge. They made a turn in the gorge and the noises became muffled. But they knew the wild hillmen would quickly be sweeping down the ravine after them, like wolves on the death-trail.

"That Waziri spy must have gotten back to Yakub Khan," panted Hassan. "They want blood, not gold. Do you suppose they've wiped out Hawklin?"

"Hawklin might have passed down this gorge before the Jowakis came up to set their ambush," answered O'Donnell. "Or the Jowakis might have been following him when they sighted us coming and set that trap for us. I've got an idea Hawklin is somewhere ahead of us."

"No matter," answered Hassan. "This horse won't carry us far. He's tiring fast. Their horses may be fresh. We'd better look for a place where we can turn and fight. If we can hold them off until dark maybe we can sneak away."

They had covered perhaps another mile and already they heard faint sounds of pursuit, far behind them, when abruptly they came out into a broad bowl-like place, walled by sheer cliffs. From the

midst of this bowl a gradual slope led up to a bottle-neck pass on the other side, the exit to this natural arena. Something unnatural about that bottle-neck struck O'Donnell, even as Hassan yelled and jumped down from the horse. A low stone wall closed the narrow gut of the pass. A rifle cracked from that wall just as O'Donnell's horse threw up its head in alarm at the glint of the sun on the blue barrel. The bullet meant for the rider smashed into the horse's head instead.

The beast lurched to a thundering fall, and O'Donnell jumped clear and rolled behind a cluster of rocks, where Hassan had already taken cover. Flashes of fire spat from the wall, and bullets whined off the boulders about them. They looked at each other with grim, sardonic humor.

"Well, we've found Hawklin!" said Hassan.

"And in a few minutes Yakub Khan will come up behind us and we'll be between the devil and the deep blue sea!" O'Donnell laughed hardly, but their situation was desperate. With enemies blocking the way ahead of them and other enemies coming up the gorge behind them, they were trapped.

The boulders behind which they were crouching protected them from the fire from the wall, but would afford no protection from the Jowakis when they rode out of the gorge. If they changed their position they would be riddled by the men in front of them. If they did not change it, they would be shot down by the Jowakis behind them.

A voice shouted tauntingly: "Come out and get shot, you bloody bounders!" Hawklin was making no attempt to keep up the masquerade. "I know you, Hassan! Who's that Kurd with you? I thought I brained him last night!"

"Yes, a Kurd!" answered O'Donnell. "One called Ali el Ghazi!"

After a moment of astounded silence, Hawklin shouted: "I might have guessed it, you Yankee swine! Oh, I know who you are, all right! Well, it doesn't matter now! We've got you where you can't wriggle!"

“You’re in the same fix, Hawklin!” yelled O’Donnell. “You heard the shooting back down the gorge?”

“Sure. We stopped to water the horses and were just ready to move on when we heard it and paused a bit. Who’s chasing you?”

“Yakub Khan and a hundred Jowakis!” O’Donnell purposely exaggerated. “When he’s wiped us out, do you think he’ll let you get away? After you tried to torture his secrets out of one of his men?”

“You’d better let us join you,” advised Hassan, recognizing, like O’Donnell, their one, desperate chance. “There’s a big fight coming and you’ll need all the help you can get if you expect to get out alive!”

Hawklin’s turbaned head appeared over the wall; he evidently trusted the honor of the men he hated, and did not fear a treacherous shot.

“Is that the truth?” he yelled.

“Don’t you hear the horses?” O’Donnell retorted.

No need to ask. The gorge reverberated with the thunder of hoofs and with wild yells. Hawklin paled. He knew what mercy he could expect from Yakub Khan. And he knew the fighting ability of the two adventurers — knew how heavily their aid would count in a fight to the death.

“Get in, quick!” he shouted. “If we’re still alive when the fight’s over we’ll decide who gets the idol then!”

Truly it was no time to think of treasure, even of the Crimson God! Life itself was at stake. O’Donnell and Hassan leaped up, rifles in hand, and sprinted up the slope toward the wall. Just as they reached it the first horsemen burst out of the gorge and began firing. Crouching behind the wall, Hawklin and his men returned the fire. Half a dozen saddles were emptied and the Jowakis, demoralized by the unexpectedness of the volley, wheeled and fled back into the gorge.

O’Donnell glanced at the men Fate had made his allies — the thieves who had stolen his treasure-map and would gladly have

killed him fifteen minutes before: Hawklin, grim and hard-eyed in his Afghan guise, Jehungir Khan, dapper even after leagues of riding, and three hairy Yusufzai swashbucklers, addressed variously as Akbar, Suliman and Yusuf. These bared their teeth at him. This was an alliance of wolves, which would last only so long as the common menace lasted.

The men behind the wall began sniping at white-clad figures flitting among the rocks and bushes near the mouth of the gorge. The Jowakis had dismounted and were crawling into the bowl, taking advantage of every bit of cover. Their rifles cracked from behind every boulder and stunted tamarisk.

“They must have been following us,” snarled Hawklin, squinting along his rifle barrel. “O’Donnell, you lied! There can’t be a hundred men out there.”

“Enough to cut our throats, anyway,” retorted O’Donnell, pressing his trigger. A man darting toward a rock yelped and crumpled, and a yell of rage went up from the lurking warriors. “Anyway, there’s nothing to keep Yakub Khan from sending for reinforcements. His village isn’t many hours’ ride from here.”

Their conversation was punctuated by the steady cracking of the rifles. The Jowakis, well hidden, were suffering little from the exchange.

“We’ve a sporting chance behind this wall,” growled Hawklin. “No telling how many centuries it’s stood here. I believe it was built by the same race that built the Red God’s temple. You’ll find ruins like this all through these hills. Damn!” He yelled at his men: “Hold your fire! Our ammunition’s getting low. They’re working in close for a rush. Save your cartridges for it. We’ll mow ’em down when they get into the open.” An instant later he shouted: “Here they come!”

The Jowakis were advancing on foot, flitting from rock to rock, from bush to stunted bush, firing as they came. The defenders grimly held their fire, crouching low and peering through the shallow crenelations. Lead flattened against the stone, knocking off

chips and dust. Suliman swore luridly as a slug ripped into his shoulder. Back in the gorge-mouth O'Donnell glimpsed Yakub Khan's red beard, but the chief took cover before he could draw a bead. Wary as a fox, Yakub was not leading the charge in person.

But his clansmen fought with untamed ferocity. Perhaps the silence of the defenders fooled them into thinking their ammunition was exhausted. Perhaps the blood-lust that burned in their veins overcame their cunning. At any rate they broke cover suddenly, thirty-five or forty of them, and rushed up the slope with the rising ululation of a wolf-pack. Point-blank they fired their rifles and then lunged at the barrier with three-foot knives in their hands.

"Now!" screamed Hawklin, and a close-range volley raked the oncoming horde. In an instant the slope was littered with writhing figures. The men behind that wall were veteran fighters, to a man, who could not miss at that range. The toll taken by their sweeping hail of lead was appalling, but the survivors came on, eyes glaring, foam on their beards, blades glittering in hairy fists.

"Bullets won't stop 'em!" yelled Hawklin, livid, as he fired his last rifle cartridge. "Hold the wall or we're all dead men!"

The defenders emptied their guns into the thick of the mass and then rose up behind the wall, drawing steel or clubbing rifles. Hawklin's strategy had failed, and now it was hand-to-hand, touch and go, and the devil take the unlucky.

Men stumbled and went down beneath the slash of the last bullets, but over their writhing bodies the horde rolled against the wall and locked there. All up and down the barrier sounded the smash of bone-splintering blows, the rasp and slither of steel meeting steel, the gasping oaths of dying men. The handful of defenders still had the advantage of position, and dead men lay thick at the foot of the wall before the Jowakis got a foothold on the barricade. A wild-eyed tribesman jammed the muzzle of an ancient musket full in Akbar's face, and the discharge all but blew off the Yusufzai's head. Into the gap left by the falling body the howling Jowaki lunged, hurling himself up and over the wall before

O’Donnell could reach the spot. The American had stepped back, fumbling to reload his rifle, only to find his belt empty. Just then he saw the raving Jowaki come over the wall. He ran at the man, clubbing his rifle, just as the Pathan dropped his empty musket and drew a long knife. Even as it cleared the scabbard O’Donnell’s rifle butt crushed his skull.

O’Donnell sprang over the falling corpse to meet the men swarming on to the wall. Swinging his rifle like a flail, he had no time to see how the fight was going on either side of him. Hawklin was swearing in English, Hassan in Persian, and somebody was screaming in mortal agony. He heard the sound of blows, gasps, curses, but he could not spare a glance to right or left. Three blood-mad tribesmen were fighting like wildcats for a foothold on the wall. He beat at them until his rifle stock was a splintered fragment, and two of them were down with broken heads, but the other, straddling the wall, grabbed the American with gorilla-like hands and dragged him into quarters too close to use his bludgeon. Half throttled by those hairy fingers on his throat, O’Donnell dragged out his *kindhjal* and stabbed blindly, again and again, until blood gushed over his hand, and with a moaning cry the Jowaki released him and toppled moaning from the wall.

Gasping for air, O’Donnell looked about him, realizing the pressure had slackened. No longer the barrier was massed with wild faces. The Jowakis were staggering down the slope — the few left to flee. Their losses had been terrible, and not a man of those who retreated but streamed blood from some wound.

But the victory had been costly. Suliman lay limply across the wall, his head smashed like an egg. Akbar was dead. Yusuf was dying, with a stab-wound in the belly, and his screams were terrible. As O’Donnell looked he saw Hawklin ruthlessly end his agony with a pistol bullet through the head. Then the American saw Jehungir Khan, sitting with his back against the wall, his hands pressed to his body, while blood seeped steadily between his fingers. The prince’s lips were blue, but he achieved a ghastly smile.

“Born in a palace,” he whispered. “And I’m dying behind a rock wall! No matter — it is *Kismet*. There is a curse on heathen treasure — men have always died when they rode the trail of the Blood-Stained God —” And he died even as he spoke.

Hawklin, O’Donnell and Hassan glanced silently at each other. They were the only survivors — three grim figures, blackened with powder-smoke, splashed with blood, their garments tattered. The fleeing Jowakis had vanished in the gorge, leaving the canyon-bowl empty except for the dead men on the slope.

“Yakub got away!” Hawklin snarled. “I saw him sneaking off when they broke. He’ll make for his village — get the whole tribe on our trail! Come on! We can find the temple. Let’s make a race of it — take the chance of getting the idol and then making our way out of the mountains somehow, before he catches us. We’re in this jam together. We might as well forget what’s passed and join forces for good. There’s enough treasure for the three of us.”

“There’s truth in what you say,” growled O’Donnell. “But you hand over that map before we start.”

Hawklin still held a smoking pistol in his hand, but before he could lift it, Hassan covered him with a revolver.

“I saved a few cartridges for this,” said the Persian, and Hawklin saw the blue noses of the bullets in the chambers. “Give me that gun. Now give the map to O’Donnell.”

Hawklin shrugged his shoulders and produced the crumpled parchment. “Damn you, I cut a third of that treasure, if we get it!” he snarled.

O’Donnell glanced at it and thrust it into his girdle.

“All right. I don’t hold grudges. You’re a swine, but if you play square with us, we’ll treat you as an equal partner, eh, Hassan?”

The Persian nodded, thrusting both guns into his girdle. “This is no time to quibble. It will take the best efforts of all three of us if we get out of this alive. Hawklin, if the Jowakis catch up with us I’ll give you your pistol. If they don’t you won’t need it.”

IV
Toll of the God

There were horses tied in the narrow pass behind the wall. The three men mounted the best beasts, turned the others loose and rode up the canyon that wound away and away beyond the pass. Night fell as they travelled, but through the darkness they pushed recklessly on. Somewhere behind them, how far or how near they could not know, rode the tribesmen of Yakub Khan, and if the chief caught them his vengeance would be ghastly. So through the blackness of the nighted Himalayas they rode, three desperate men on a mad quest, with death on their trail, unknown perils ahead of them, and suspicion of each other edging their nerves.

O'Donnell watched Hassan like a hawk. Search of the bodies at the wall had failed to reveal a single unfired cartridge, so Hassan's pistols were the only firearms left in the party. That gave the Persian an advantage O'Donnell did not relish. If the time came when Hassan no longer needed the aid of his companions, O'Donnell believed the Persian would not scruple to shoot them both down in cold blood. But he would not turn on them as long as he needed their assistance, and when it came to a fight — O'Donnell grimly fingered his blades. More than once he had matched them against hot lead, and lived.

As they groped their way by the starlight, guided by the map which indicated landmarks unmistakable, even by night, O'Donnell found himself wondering again what it was that the maker of that map had tried to tell him, just before he died. Death had come to Pembroke quicker than he had expected. In the very midst of a description of the temple, blood had gushed to his lips and he had sunk back, desperately fighting to gasp a few more words even as he died. It sounded like a warning — but of what?

Dawn was breaking as they came out of a narrow gorge into a deep, high-walled valley. The defile through which they entered, a narrow alley between towering cliffs, was the only entrance; without the map they would never have found it. It came out upon a

ledge which ran along the valley wall, a jutting shelf a hundred feet wide with the cliff rising three hundred feet above it on one hand, and falling away to a thousand foot drop on the other. There seemed no way down into the mist-veiled depths of the valley, far below. But they wasted few glances on what lay below them, for what they saw ahead of them drove hunger and fatigue from their minds. There on the ledge stood the temple, gleaming in the rising sun. It was carved out of the sheer rock of the cliff, its great portico facing them. The ledge was like a pathway to its dully-glinting door.

What race, what culture it represented, O'Donnell did not try to guess. A thousand unknown conquerors had swept over these hills before the grey dawn of history. Nameless civilizations had risen and crumbled before the peaks shook to the trumpets of Alexander.

"How will we open the door?" O'Donnell wondered. The great bronze portal looked as though it were built to withstand artillery. He unfolded the map and glanced again at the notes scrawled on the margins. But Hassan slipped from his saddle and ran ahead of them, crying out in his greed. A strange frenzy akin to madness had seized the Persian at the sight of the temple, and the thought of the fabulous wealth that lay within.

"He's a fool!" grunted Hawklin, swinging down from his horse. "Pembroke left a warning scribbled on the margin of that map — 'The temple can be entered, but be careful, for the god will take his toll.'"

Hassan was tugging and pulling at various ornaments and projections on the portal. They heard him cry out exultantly as it moved under his hands — then his cry changed to a scream of terror as the door, a ton of carved bronze, swayed outward and fell crashing. The Persian had no time to avoid it. It crushed him like an ant. He was completely hidden under the great metal slab from beneath which oozed streams of crimson.

Hawklin shrugged his shoulders.

"I said he was a fool. The ancients knew how to guard their treasure. I wonder how Pembroke escaped being smashed."

“He evidently stumbled on some way to swing the door open without releasing it from its hinges,” answered O’Donnell. “That’s what happened when Hassan jerked on those knobs. That must have been what Pembroke was trying to tell me when he died — which knobs to pull and which to let alone.”

“Well, the god has his toll, and the way’s clear for us,” grunted Hawklin, callously striding past the encrimsoned door. O’Donnell was close on his heels. Both men paused on the broad threshold, peering into the shadowy interior much as they might have peered into the lair of a serpent. But no sudden doom descended on them, no shape of menace rose before them. They entered cautiously. Silence held the ancient temple, broken only by the soft scruff of their boots.

They blinked in the semi-gloom; out of it a blaze of crimson like a lurid glow of sunset smote their eyes. They saw the Blood-Stained God, a thing of brass, crusted with flaming gems. It was in the shape of a dwarfish man, and it stood upright on its great splay feet on a block of basalt, facing the door. To the left of it, a few feet from the base of the pedestal, the floor of the temple was cleft from wall to wall by a chasm some fifteen feet wide. At some time or other an earthquake had split the rock, and there was no telling how far it descended into echoing depths. Into that black abyss, ages ago, doubtless screaming victims had been hurled by hideous priests as human sacrifices to the Crimson God. The walls of the temple were lofty and fantastically carved, the roof dim and shadowy above them.

But the attention of the men was fixed avidly on the idol. It was brutish, repellent, a leprous monstrosity, whose red jewels gave it a repellently blood-splashed appearance. But it represented a wealth that made their brains swim.

“God!” breathed O’Donnell. “Those gems are real! They’re worth a fortune!”

“Millions!” panted Hawklin. “Too much to share with a damned Yankee!”

It was those words, breathed unconsciously between the Englishman's clenched teeth, which saved O'Donnell's life, dazzled as he was by the blaze of that unholy idol. He wheeled, caught the glint of Hawklin's saber, and ducked just in time. The whistling blade sliced a fold from his head-dress. Cursing his carelessness — for he might have expected treachery — he leaped back, whipping out his scimitar.

The tall Englishman came in a rush, and O'Donnell met him, close-pent rage loosing itself in a gust of passion. Back and forth they fought, up and down before the leering idol, feet scruffing swiftly on the rock, blades rasping, slithering and ringing, blue sparks showering as they moved through patches of shadow.

Hawklin was taller than O'Donnell, longer of arm, but O'Donnell was equally strong, and a blinding shade quicker on his feet. Hawklin feared the naked *kindhjal* in his left hand more than he did the scimitar, and he endeavored to keep the fighting at long range, where his superior reach would count heavily. He gripped a dagger in his own left hand, but he knew he could not compete with O'Donnell in knife-play.

But he was full of deadly tricks with the longer steel. Again and again O'Donnell dodged death by the thickness of a hair, and so far his own skill and speed had not availed to break through the Englishman's superb guard.

O'Donnell sought in vain to work into close quarters. Once Hawklin tried to rush him over the lip of the chasm, but nearly impaled himself on the American's scimitar and abandoned the attempt.

Then suddenly, unexpectedly, the end came. O'Donnell's foot slipped slightly on the smooth floor, and his blade wavered for an instant. Hawklin threw all his strength and speed behind a lunging thrust that would have driven his saber clear through O'Donnell's body had it reached its mark. But the American was not as much off-balance as Hawklin thought. A twist of his supple body, and the long lean blade passed beneath his right arm-pit, ploughing through

the loose *khalat* as it grazed his ribs. For an instant the blade was caught in the folds of the loose cloth, and Hawklin yelled wildly and stabbed with his dagger. It sank deep in O'Donnell's right arm as he lifted it, and simultaneously the *kindhjal* in O'Donnell's left hand plunged between Hawklin's ribs.

The Englishman's scream broke in a ghastly gurgle. He reeled back, and as O'Donnell tore out the blade, blood spurted and Hawklin fell limply, dead before he hit the floor.

O'Donnell dropped his weapon and knelt, ripping a strip of cloth from his *khalat* for a bandage. His wounded arm was bleeding freely, but a quick investigation assured him that the dagger had not severed any important muscle or vein.

As he bound it up, tying knots with his fingers and teeth, he glanced at the Blood-Stained God which leered down on him and the man he had just slain. It had taken full toll, and it seemed to gloat, with its carven, gargoyle face. He shivered. Surely it must be accursed. Could wealth gained from such a source, and at such a price as the dead man at his feet, ever bring luck? He put the thought from him. The Red God was his, bought by sweat and blood and sword-strokes. He must pack it on a horse and begone before the vengeance of Yakub Khan overtook him. He could not go back the way he had come. The Jowakis barred that way. He must strike out blind, through unfamiliar mountains, trusting to luck to make his way to safety.

"Put up your hands!" It was a triumphant shout that rang to the roof.

In one motion he was on his feet, facing the door — then he froze.

Two men stood before him, and one covered him with a cocked rifle. The man was tall, lean and red-bearded.

"Yakub Khan!" ejaculated O'Donnell.

The other man was a powerful fellow who seemed vaguely familiar.

“Drop your weapons!” The chief laughed harshly. “You thought I had run away to my village, did you not? Fool! I sent all my men but one, who was the only one not wounded, to rouse the tribe, while with this man I followed you. I have hung on your trail all night, and I stole in here while you fought with that one on the floor there. Your time has come, you Kurdish dog! Back! Back! Back!”

Under the threat of the rifle O’Donnell moved slowly backward until he stood close to the black chasm. Yakub followed him at a distance of a few feet, the rifle muzzle never wavering.

“You have led me to treasure,” muttered Yakub, squinting down the blue barrel in the dim light. “I did not know this temple held such an idol! Had I known, I would have looted it long ago, in spite of the superstitions of my followers. Yar Muhammad, pick up his sword and dagger.”

At the name the identity of Yakub’s powerful follower became clear. The man stooped and picked up the sword, then exclaimed: “Allah!”

He was staring at the brazen hawk’s head that formed the pommel of O’Donnell’s scimitar.

“Wait!” the Waziri cried. “This is the sword of him who saved me from torture, at the risk of his own life! His face was covered, but I remember the hawk-head on his hilt! This is that Kurd!”

“Be silent!” snarled the chief. “He is a thief and he dies!”

“Nay!” The Waziri was galvanized with the swift, passionate loyalty of the hillman. “He saved my life! Mine, a stranger! What have you ever given me but hard tasks and scanty pay? I renounce my allegiance, you Jowaki thief!”

“Dog!” roared the chief, whirling on Yar Muhammad, who sprang back, being without a gun. Yakub Khan fired from the hip and the bullet sheared a tuft from the Waziri’s beard. Yar Muhammad yelled a curse and ran behind the idol’s pedestal.

At the crack of the shot O’Donnell was leaping to grapple with the chief, but even as he sprang he saw he would fail. With a snarl

Yakub turned the rifle on him, and in that fleeting instant O'Donnell knew death would spit from that muzzle before he could reach the Jowaki. Yakub's finger hooked the trigger — and then Yar Muhammad hurled the idol. His mighty muscles creaked as he threw it.

Full against the Jowaki it crashed, bearing him backward — over the lip of the chasm! He fired wildly as he fell, and O'Donnell felt the wind of the bullet. One frenzied shriek rang to the roof as idol and man vanished together.

Stunned, O'Donnell sprang forward and gazed down into the black depths. He looked and listened long, but no sound of their fall ever welled up to him. He shuddered at the realization of that awful depth, and drew back in voluntarily. A hard hand on his shoulder brought him around to look into the grinning, bearded countenance of Yar Muhammad.

"Thou art my comrade henceforth," said the Waziri. "If thou art he who calls himself Ali el Ghazi, is it true that a *Ferengi* lurks beneath those garments?"

O'Donnell nodded, watching the man narrowly.

Yar Muhammad but grinned the more widely.

"No matter! I have slain the chief I followed, and the hands of his tribe will be lifted against me. I must follow another chief — and I have heard many tales of the deeds of Ali el Ghazi! Wilt thou accept me as thy follower, *sahib?"*

"Thou art a man after mine own heart," said O'Donnell, extending his hand, white man fashion.

"Allah favor thee!" Yar Muhammad exclaimed joyously, returning the strong grip. "And now let us go swiftly! The Jowakis will be here before many hours have passed, and they must not find us here! But there is a secret path beyond this temple which leads down into the valley, and I know hidden trails that will take us out of the valley and far beyond their reach before they can get here. Come!"

O’Donnell took up his weapons and followed the Waziri out of the temple. The idol was gone forever, but it had been the price of his life. And there were other lost treasures that challenged a restless adventurer. Already his Irish mind was flying ahead to the search of hidden, golden hoards celebrated in a hundred other legends.

“Alhamdolillah!” he said, and laughed with the sheer joy of living as he followed the Waziri to the place where they had left the tethered horses.

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Steve Clarney

The Fire of Asshurbanipal

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The Fire of Asshurbanipal

Yar Ali squinted carefully down the blue barrel of his Lee-Enfield, called devoutly on Allah and sent a bullet through the brain of a flying rider.

“Allaho akbar!” the big Afghan shouted in glee, waving his weapon above his head. “God is great! By Allah, sahib, I have sent one of the dogs to Hell!”

His companion peered cautiously over the rim of the sand pit they had scooped with their hands. He was a lean and wiry American, Steve Clarney by name.

“Good work, old horse,” said this person. “Four left. Look — they’re drawin’ off.”

The white-robed horsemen were indeed reining away, clustering together just out of accurate rifle-range, as if in council. There had been seven when they had first swooped down on the comrades, but the fire from the two rifles in the sand pit had been deadly.

“Look, sahib — they abandon the fray!”

Yar Ali stood up boldly and shouted taunts at the departing riders, one of whom whirled and sent a bullet that kicked up sand thirty feet in front of the pit.

“They shoot like sons of dogs,” said Yar Ali in complacent self-esteem. “By Allah, did you see that rogue plunge from his saddle as my shot went home? Up, sahib, let us run after them and cut them down!”

Paying no attention to this outrageous proposal — for he knew it was but one of the gestures Afghan nature continually demands — Steve rose, dusted off his breeches, and gazing after the riders, who were now white specks on the desert, said musingly: “Those fellows ride like they had some set purpose in their minds — not a lot like men runnin’ from a lickin’.”

“Aye,” agreed Yar Ali promptly and seeing nothing inconsistent with his present attitude and recent bloodthirsty suggestion. “They ride after more of their kind — they are hawks who give up their prey not quickly. We had best move our position quickly, Steve sahib. They will come back — maybe in a few hours — maybe in a few days — it all depends on how far away lies the oasis of their tribe. But they will be back. We have guns and lives — they want both.

“And behold.”

The Afghan levered out his last empty shell and slipped a single cartridge into the breech of his rifle.

“My last bullet, sahib.”

Steve nodded. “I’ve got three left.”

He lifted his canteen and shook it. Not much water remained. He knew that Yar Ali had a little more than he. The big Afghan, bred himself in a barren land, needed less water than did the American, though the latter, judged from a white man’s standards, was hard and tough as a wolf. As he unscrewed the canteen cap and drank very sparingly, Steve mentally reviewed the chain of events that had led them to their present position.

Wanderers, soldiers of fortune, thrown together by chance and attracted to each other by mutual admiration, he and Yar Ali had wandered from India up through Turkestan and down through Persia, an oddly assorted but highly capable pair. Driven by the restless urge of the inherent wanderlust, their avowed purpose — which they swore to and sometimes believed themselves — was the accumulation of some vague and undiscovered treasure — some pot of gold at the foot of some unborn rainbow.

Then in ancient Shiraz they had heard of the Fire of Asshurbanipal. From the lips of an ancient Persian trader, who only half believed what he repeated to them, they heard the tale that he in turn had heard in his distant youth. He had been a member of a caravan, fifty years before, which, wandering far on the southern shore of the Persian Gulf in quest of pearls, had followed the tale of a rare pearl far into the desert. The pearl, rumored found by a diver and stolen by a sheik of the interior, they did not find, but they did pick up a Turk who was dying of starvation, thirst and a bullet wound in the thigh. As he died in delirium, he babbled a wild tale of a silent dead city of black stone set in the drifting sands of the desert far to the westward, and of a flaming gem clutched in the bony fingers of a skeleton on an ancient throne.

He had not dared bring it away with him, because of an overpowering brooding horror that haunted the place, and thirst had driven him from the silent city into the desert where Bedouins had pursued and wounded him; he had escaped, riding hard until his horse fell under him. He died without telling how he had reached the mythical city in the first place, but the old trader thought he must have come from the northwest — a deserter from the Turkish army, making a desperate attempt to reach the Gulf.

The men of the caravan had made no attempt to plunge still further into the desert in search of the city, for, said the old trader, they believed it to be the ancient City of Evil spoken of in the Necronomicon of the mad Alhazred — the city of the dead on which an ancient curse rested. And the gem was that ancient and accursed

jewel belonging to a king of long ago whom the Grecians called Sardanapalus and the Semitic peoples Asshurbanipal.

Steve had been fascinated by the tale. Admitting to himself that it was doubtless one of the ten thousand cock-and-bull myths mooted about the East — still, there was always a possibility. And Yar Ali had heard hints before of a silent city of the sands; tales had followed the east-bound caravans over the high Persian uplands and across the sands of Turkestan, into the mountain country and beyond — vague tales, guarded whispers of a black city of the genii, deep in the hazes of a haunted desert.

So following the trail of the legend, the companions had come from Shiraz to the Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf, and there had heard more from an old man who had been a diver for pearls in his youth. The loquacity of age was on him, and he told tales repeated to him by wandering tribesmen who had them in turn from the wild nomads of the deep interior — and again Steve and Yar Ali heard of the still black city with giant beasts carved of stone, and the skeleton sultan who held the blazing gem.

And so, mentally swearing at himself for a fool, Steve had made the plunge, and Yar Ali, secure in the knowledge that all things lay on the lap of Allah, had come with him. Their scanty money had been just sufficient to provide riding camels and provisions for a bold flying invasion of the unknown. Their only chart had been the vague rumors that placed the supposed location of the City of Evil.

There had been days of hard travel, pushing the beasts and conserving water and food. Then a blinding sand-wind in which they had lost the camels. After that, long miles of staggering through the sands, battered by a flaming sun, subsisting on rapidly dwindling water, and food Yar Ali had in a pouch. No thought of finding the mythical city now. They went on in hope of stumbling upon a spring; they knew that behind them no oases lay within a distance they could hope to cover on foot. It was a desperate chance but their only one.

Then white-clad hawks had swooped down on them out of the haze of the skyline, and from a shallow and hastily scooped trench, the adventurers had exchanged shots with the wild riders who circled them at top speed. The bullets of the Bedouins had skipped through their make-shift fortifications, knocking dust into their eyes and flicking bits of cloth from their garments, but by good chance neither of them had been hit.

Their one bit of luck, reflected Steve, as he cursed himself for a fool. What a mad venture it had been, anyway! To think that two men could so dare the desert and live, much less wrest from its abysmal bosom the secrets of the ages! And that crazy tale of a skeleton hand gripping a flaming gem in a dead city — bosh! What utter rot. He must have been crazy himself, the American decided, with the clarity of view that suffering and danger bring.

“Well, old horse,” said Steve, lifting his rifle, “let’s get goin’. It’s a toss-up if we die of thirst or get sniped off by the desert-brothers. Anyway, we’re doin’ no good here.”

“God gives,” agreed Yar Ali cheerfully. “The sun sinks westward. Soon the coolness of night will be upon us. Perhaps we will find water yet, sahib. Look, the terrain changes to the south.”

Steve shaded his eyes against the dying sun. Beyond a level, barren expanse of several miles in width, the land did indeed tend to become more broken; aborted hills were in evidence. The American slung his rifle over his arm and sighed.

“Heave ahead, old horse; we’re food for the buzzards anyhow.”

The sun sank and the moon rose, flooding the desert with weird silver light. Drifted sand glimmered in long ripples, as if a sea had suddenly been frozen into immobility. Steve, parched fiercely by a thirst he dared not fully quench, cursed beneath his breath. The desert was beautiful beneath the moon, with the beauty of a cold marble Lorelei to lure men to destruction. What a mad quest, his weary brain repeated; the Fire of Asshurbanipal retreated into the mazes of unreality with each step. The desert became not merely a material waste, but the greyness of the lost eons, in whose depths dreamed sunken things.

Steve stumbled and swore; was he failing already? Yar Ali swung along with the easy, tireless stride of the mountain man and Steve set his teeth, nerving himself to greater effort. They were entering the broken country at last and the going became harder. Shallow gullies and narrow ravines knifed the earth with wavering patterns. Most of them were nearly filled with sand and there was no trace of water anywhere.

“This country was once oasis country,” commented Yar Ali. “Allah knows how many centuries ago the sand took it, as the sand has taken so many cities in Turkestan.”

They swung on, like dead men wandering in a grey land of death. The moon grew red and sinister as she sank, and shadowy darkness settled over the desert. Even the big Afghan’s feet began to drag and Steve kept himself erect only by a savage effort of will. At last they came to a sort of ridge, on the southern side of which the land sloped downward.

“We rest,” declared Steve. “There’s no water in this hellish country. No use in goin’ on forever. My legs are stiff as gun barrels. Here’s a kind of stunted cliff, about as high as a man’s shoulder, facing south. We’ll sleep in the lee of it.”

“And shall we not keep watch, Steve sahib?”

“We don’t,” answered Steve. “If the Arabs can find us here, let ’em. If they cut our throats while we sleep, so much the better. We’re goners anyhow.”

With which optimistic observation Steve laid down stiffly in the deep sand. But Yar Ali stood, leaning forward, straining his eyes into the illusive darkness that turned the star-flecked horizons to murky wells of shadow.

“Something lies on the skyline to the south,” he muttered uneasily. “A hill? I cannot tell, or even be sure that I see anything at all.”

“You’re seein’ mirages already,” said Steve irritably. “Lie down and sleep.”

And, so saying, Steve slumbered.

The sun in his eyes awoke him. He sat up, yawning, and his first sensation was that of thirst. He lifted his canteen and wet his lips. One drink left. Yar Ali still slept. Steve’s eyes wandered over the southern horizon and he started. He kicked the recumbent Afghan.

“Hey, wake up, Ali; I reckon you weren’t seein’ things after all. There’s your hill — and a queer lookin’ one, too.”

The Afridi awoke, as a wild thing wakes, swiftly and instantly, his hand leaping to his long knife as he glared about for enemies. His gaze followed Steve’s pointing fingers and his eyes widened.

“By Allah and by Allah!” he swore. “We have come into a land of djinn! That is no hill — it is a city of stone in the midst of the sands!”

Steve bounded to his feet like a steel spring released, straining his eyes. As he gazed with bated breath, a fierce shout escaped his lips. At his feet the slope of the ridge ran down into a wide and level expanse of sand that stretched away southward. And far away, across those sands, to his straining sight the “hill” took shape, like a mirage growing from the drifting sands.

He saw great uneven walls, massive battlements — all about crawled the sands like a living, sensate thing, drifted high about the walls, softening the rugged outlines. No wonder at first glance the whole had appeared like a hill.

“Kara-Shehr!” Steve exclaimed fiercely. “Beled-el-Djinn! The city of the dead! It wasn’t a pipe-dream after all! We’ve found it — by God, we’ve found it! Come on! Let’s go!”

Yar Ali shook his head uncertainly and muttered something about evil djinn under his breath, but he followed. As for Steve, so fired was he by the sight that he forgot his thirst and hunger and the fatigue that a few hours’ sleep had not fully overcome. He trudged on swiftly, oblivious to the rising heat, his eyes gleaming with the lust of the explorer. It was not altogether greed for the fabled gem that had prompted Steve Clarney to risk his life in that grim wilderness; deep in his soul lurked the age-old heritage of the white man, the urge to seek out the hidden places of the world, and that urge had been stirred powerfully by the tale of the ancient lost city.

Now as they crossed the level waste that separated the broken land from the city, they saw the broken walls take clearer form and shape, as if they grew out of the morning sky. The city seemed built of huge blocks of black stone, but how high the walls had been there was no telling because of the sand that drifted about their base; in many places they had fallen away and the sand hid the fragments entirely.

The sun reached her zenith and thirst intruded itself in spite of zeal and enthusiasm, but Steve fiercely mastered his suffering. His lips were parched and swollen but he would not take that last drink until he reached the ruined city. Yar Ali wet his lips from his canteen and tried to share the remainder; Steve shook his head.

In the ferocious heat of the desert afternoon they reached the ruins, and passing through a wide breach in the crumbling wall, gazed on the dead city. Sand choked the ancient streets and lent fantastic form to huge, fallen and half hidden columns. So crumbled into decay and so covered with sand was the whole that the explorers could make out little of the original plan of the city — now it was but a waste of drifted sand and crumbling stone over which hung, like an invisible cloud, an aura of unspeakable antiquity.

But directly in front of them ran a broad avenue, the outline of which not even the ravaging sands and winds of time had been able to efface. On either side of the way were ranged huge columns, not unusually tall but incredibly massive. On the top of each column stood a figure carved from solid stone — great, sombre images, half human, half bestial, partaking of the brooding brutishness of the whole city. Steve cried out in amazement.

"The winged bulls of Nineveh! The bulls with men's heads! By the saints, Ali, the old tales are true! The ancient Assyrians did build this city! The whole tale's true! They must have come here when the Babylonians destroyed Assyria — why, this scene's a dead ringer for pictures I've seen — reconstructed scenes of old Nineveh! And look!"

He pointed down the broad street to the great building which reared at the other end, a colossal, brooding edifice whose columns and walls of solid black stone blocks defied the winds and the sands of time. The drifting, obliterating sea washed about its foundations, overflowing into its doorways, but it would require a thousand years to inundate the whole structure.

"An abode of devils," muttered Yar Ali, uneasily.

"The temple of Baal!" exclaimed Steve. "Come on! I was afraid we'd find all the palaces and temples hidden by the sand and have to dig for the gem. But this was the highest point in the city."

They strode up the broad way, and Yar Ali, utterly fearless in the face of human foes, glanced nervously to right and left, half expecting to see a horned and fantastic face leering at him from behind a column. Steve himself felt the sombre antiquity of the place, and almost found himself fearing a rush of bronze war chariots down the forgotten street, or to hear the sudden menacing flare of bronze trumpets. The silence in dead cities was so much more intense, he reflected, than that on the open desert.

They came to the portals of the great temple. Rows of immense columns flanked the wide doorway, which was ankle deep in sand, and from which sagged massive bronze frameworks that had once

braced mighty doors, whose polished woodwork had centuries ago rotted away. They passed into a mighty hall of misty twilight, whose shadowy stone roof was upheld by columns like forest trees. The whole effect of the architecture was one of awesome magnitude, and sullen, breathtaking splendor, like a temple built by sombre giants for the abode of dark gods.

Yar Ali walked fearfully as if he expected to awake sleeping gods, and Steve, without the Afridi's superstitions, yet felt the gloomy majesty of the place lay sombre hands on his soul.

No trace of a footprint showed in the deep sand on the floor; half a century had passed since the affrighted and devil-ridden Turk had paced these silent halls. That there were Bedouins in the littoral Steve knew, but it was easy to see why those superstitious sons of the desert avoided this haunted city — and haunted it was, not by actual ghosts, perhaps, but by the shadows of lost splendors.

As they trod the sand of the hall which seemed endless, Steve pondered many questions: how did those fugitives from the wrath of frenzied rebels build this city? Why did they choose this spot? How did they pass through the country of their foes — for Babylonia lay between Assyria and the Arabian desert. Yet there had been no other place for them to go, reflected Steve; east lay Syria and the sea and north and west swarmed "the dangerous Medes," those fierce Aryans whose aid had stiffened the arm of Babylon to smite her foe to the dust.

And whence came the stone that went into this city's building? Surely, as Yar Ali had said, once this was fertile country, watered by oases; and doubtless in the broken country they had passed over the night before, there had been quarries in the old days.

Then what had caused the city's downfall? Did the encroachment of the sands and the filling up of the springs cause the people to abandon it, or was it already a city of silence before the sands crept over the walls? Did the downfall come from within or without? Did civil war blot out the inhabitants, or were they overthrown by some powerful foe from the desert? Steve shook his head in baffled

chagrin. The answers to those questions were hidden and lost in the mazes of forgotten ages.

“Allaho akbar!” They had traversed the great shadowy hall and at its further end they came upon a hideous black stone altar, behind which loomed an ancient god, bestial and horrific. Steve shrugged his shoulders as he recognized the monstrous aspect of the image — aye, that was Baal, on whose black altar in other ages many a screaming, writhing naked victim had offered up the quivering soul. The idol embodied in its utter, abysmal and sullen bestiality the whole soul of this demoniac city. Surely, thought Steve, the builders of Nineveh and Kara-Shehr were cast in another mold than the people of today. Their art and culture were too ponderous, too grimly barren of the lighter aspects of humanity, to be wholly human. Their architecture was of highest skill, yet of a massive, sullen and brutish nature beyond the ken of modern man.

The adventurers went through a narrow door that opened in the end of the hall close to the idol, and came into a series of wide chambers, connected by column-flanked corridors. Along these they strode, and came at last to a wide stairway. Here Yar Ali halted.

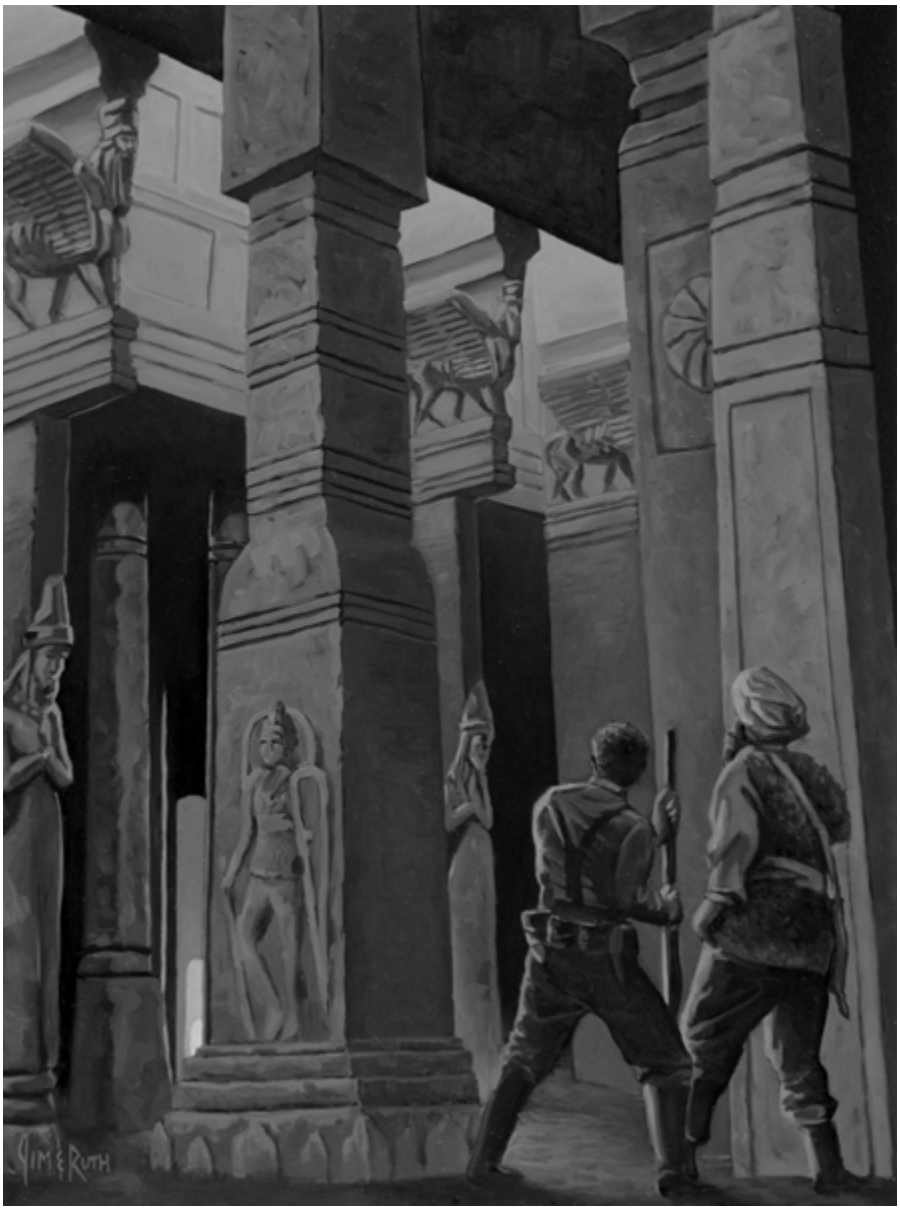
“Wait a bit, sahib, we have dared much. Is it wise to dare more?”

Steve, a-quiver with eagerness, yet understood the Afghan’s mind.

“You mean we shouldn’t go up these stairs?”

“We have wandered into the castle of devils, Steve sahib; any moment a djinn may bite our heads off.”

“Well,” said Steve, “we’re dead men anyhow. But I tell you — you go on back through the hall and watch for Arabs while I go upstairs.”



“Watch for a wind on the horizon,” responded the Afghan gloomily, shifting his rifle and loosening his long knife in its scabbard. “No Bedouin comes here. Lead on, sahib. Thou’rt mad after the manner of all Franks, but I would not have thee face the djinn alone.”

So the companions mounted the massive stairs, leaving their footprints in the dust that sifted deeply there. At the top they came into a wide circular chamber. This was lighted much better than the rest of the temple, by windows and by light that poured in from the

high, pierced ceiling. But another light lent itself to the illumination. Both saw it at the same instant and both shouted in amazement.

A marble throne stood on a sort of stone dais, at the top of a short flight of broad steps, and on this throne glimmered something that caught the light of the sun and shed a crimson glow all about. The Fire of Asshurbanipal!

Even after they had found the city, Steve had not really allowed himself to believe that they would find the stone. Yet there it was, shimmering among a heap of bones on the marble throne — a great ruby, as big as a pigeon's egg!

Steve sprang across the chamber and up the steps. Yar Ali was at his heels, yet when Steve would have taken up the ruby, the Afghan laid a hand on his arm.

"Let us not be hasty, Steve sahib," said the big Muhammadan. "A curse lies on these ancient things. Else why has this rare gem lain here untouched in a country of thieves for so many centuries? It is not well to disturb the possessions of the dead."

"Bosh," this from Steve. "Superstitions. The Bedouins were scared by the tales that have come down to them from their ancestors. They mistrust cities anyway, and no doubt this one had an evil reputation in its lifetime. And nobody except Bedouins have ever seen this place before — except that Turk, who was probably half-demented with suffering.

"You can see for yourself that the 'skeleton hand' stuff was an embellishment — those bones are crumblin'. They may be the bones of a king — maybe not. Anyway, no tellin' how long they've been here. The dry desert air preserves such things indefinitely. May be Assyrian, or most likely Arab — some beggar that got the gem and then died on that throne, for some reason or other. Look, only the skull is anything like whole, and it'll turn to dust if I touch it."

He stretched forth his hand, but again Yar Ali halted him; the Afghan's eyes were uneasy. He seemed to be listening.

"I heard a sound, sahib," he muttered. "For the last few minutes I have heard stealthy noises as if ghosts or dead men were stealing

upon us. Harken! Is that not the sound of beings mounting the stairs?"

Steve wheeled, alert.

"By Judas, Ali," he snapped, "something is out there —"

The ancient walls re-echoed to a chorus of wild yells as a horde of savage figures flooded the chamber. For one dazed, insane instant Steve believed, wildly, that they were being attacked by re-embodied warriors of a vanished age, then the spiteful crack of a bullet past his ear and the acrid smell of powder told him that their foes were material enough. Clarney cursed; in their fancied security they had been caught like rats in a trap by the pursuing Arabs.

Even as the American threw up his rifle, Yar Ali fired point-blank from the hip, hurled his empty rifle into the horde and leaped down the steps yelling, his long Khyber knife shimmering in his hairy hand. Into his gusto for battle went real relief that his foes were human. A bullet ripped the turban from his head, but an Arab went down with a split skull beneath the hillsman's first, shearing stroke.

A tall Bedouin clapped his gun muzzle to the Afghan's side, but before he could pull the trigger, Clarney's bullet scattered his brains. The number of the attackers hindered them, and the tigerish quickness of the big Afridi made shooting as dangerous to themselves as to him. Some of them swarmed about him while others charged up the steps after Steve, who had expended his second bullet with deadly effect. At that range there was no missing.

Now in a flashing instant Clarney saw two things — a tall Arab, who with froth on his beard and a heavy scimitar uplifted, was almost upon him, and another who crouched on the floor drawing a careful bead on the plunging Yar Ali. Steve made an instant choice and fired over the shoulder of the charging swordsman, killing the rifleman. Steve had voluntarily forfeited his own life to save his friend, for the scimitar was swinging at his own head, but at that instant the wielder slipped on the marble steps and the curved blade, swinging erratically from its arc, clashed on Steve's rifle barrel. In an instant the American clubbed his rifle and as the Arab

recovered his balance and again raised the scimitar, Clarney struck with all his power, shattering stock and skull together.

And then a heavy ball smacked into his shoulder, sickening him with the shock and almost flooring him with the impact. As he staggered, a Bedouin whipped a noose about his feet and jerked heavily. Clarney pitched headlong down the steps to strike with stunning force. A gun-stock went up to dash out his brains, but an imperious command halted the blow.

“Slay him not, but bind him hand and foot.”

As Steve struggled dazedly against many gripping hands, it seemed to him that the voice was faintly familiar.

The American’s downfall had occurred in a matter of seconds. Even as Steve’s second shot had cracked, Yar Ali had slashed a raider across the face and received a numbing blow from a rifle stock on his left arm. His sheepskin coat, worn in spite of the heat, saved his hide from half a dozen slashing knives. One was hacking at him with a scimitar, but Yar Ali engaged and locked blades, disarming his foe with a savage wrench. A rifle was discharged so close to his face that the powder burnt him, eliciting a blood-thirsty yell from the maddened Afghan. The rifleman paled and as Yar Ali swung up his blade, the Arab lifted his rifle above his head in both hands to parry the downward blow, whereupon the Afridi, with a yelp of exultation, shifted as a jungle cat strikes and plunged his long knife into the Arab’s belly. But at that instant a rifle stock, swung with all the hearty ill will its wielder could evoke, crashed against the giant’s head, laying open his scalp and dashing him to his knees.

With the dogged and silent ferocity of his breed, Yar Ali staggered blindly up again, slashing at foes he could scarcely see, but a shower of blows dropped him again, nor did his attackers cease beating him until he lay still. They would have finished him in short order but for another peremptory order from their chief. They bound the unconscious knifeman and flung him alongside Steve, who was fully conscious, though the bullet in his shoulder hurt him savagely.

He glared up at the tall Arab who stood looking down at him.

“Well, sahib,” said this one in perfect English, “do you not remember me?”

Steve scowled in the effort of concentration.

“You look familiar — by the devil! — you are — Nuredin el Mekru!”

“The sahib remembers,” Nuredin salaamed mockingly. “And you remember, no doubt, the occasion on which you made me a present of — this?”

The dark eyes shadowed with bitter menace and the sheikh indicated a thin white scar on the angle of his jaw.

“I remember,” snarled Clarney, whom pain and anger did not tend to make docile. “It was in Somaliland, years ago. You were in the slave trade then. A wretch of a negro escaped from you and took refuge with me. You walked into my camp one night in your high-handed way, started trouble and got a butcher knife across your face. I wish I’d cut your lousy throat.”

“You tried hard enough,” answered the Arab. “But now the tables are turned.”

“I thought your stampin’ ground lay west,” growled Clarney. “Yemen and the Somali country.”

“I quit the slave trade long ago,” returned the sheikh. “It is an outworn game. I led a band of raiders in Yemen for a time — then again I was forced to change my location. I came here with a few faithful followers. By Allah, these wild men nearly cut my throat at first! But I overcame their suspicions and now I lead more men than have followed me in years.

“Those you fought off yesterday were my men. They were scouts I had sent out ahead, and who rode back to report to me after you had beaten them off. My oasis lies far to the west. We have ridden many days, for I was on my way to this very city. When my scouts told me of two wanderers, I altered not my course, for I had business first in Beled-el-Djinn. We rode into the city from the west and saw your tracks in the sand. Tracking you was easy then.”

Steve growled angrily.

“You wouldn’t have caught us so easy, only we thought no Bedouin would dare to come into Kara-Shehr.”

Nuredin nodded. “But I am no Bedouin. I have traveled far and seen many lands and many races. I have talked with many men and have read in the books of the Rhoumi, the Turks and the Franks as well as those of my own race. I know that fear is smoke, that the dead are dead, and that djinn and ghosts and curses are mists that the wind blows away. I had heard the tale of the Fire of Asshurbanipal; that is why I came to this part of Arabia. But it has taken months to persuade my men to ride here with me. They fear the curse of the ancient ones who dwelt here.

“But — I am here! And your presence is an added pleasure. No doubt you have guessed why I had my men take you alive — I have a more elaborate entertainment planned for you and that Pathan swine. Now — I take the Fire of Asshurbanipal and we will go.”

He turned toward the throne and one of his men, a bearded giant with but one eye, exclaimed: “Hold, my lord! Bethink ye — this city is very old, and old cities are foul. Ancient evil reigned here before the days of Muhammad. The djinn howl through these halls when the winds blow and men have seen ghosts dancing on the walls beneath the moon. No man of mortals has dared this black city for a thousand years — save one, half a century ago, who fled shrieking.

“In the old, old days men of the desert ventured here, and many died strangely, who sought to take the jewel, and on those who even looked upon it, a curse was laid. You have come here from Yemen; you do not understand that this city and that red stone are accursed. We have followed you here against our judgment because you have proved yourself a mighty man and have said you hold a charm against all evil beings. You said you but wished to look on this evil gem, but now we see it is your intention to take it for yourself.

“Beware, my lord! Courage and war-skill overcome not the powers of darkness, and that gleaming jewel is stronger than any charm. Do not offend the djinn!”

“Nay, Nuredin, do not dare the wrath of the djinn!” chorused the other Bedouins; the sheikh’s own hard-bitten scoundrels said nothing. Hardened to crimes and impious deeds, they were less affected by the superstitions of the local Bedouins, to whom the curse on the dead city had been repeated, a dread tale, for centuries. Steve, even while hating Nuredin with unusually concentrated venom, realized the power of the man, the innate leadership that had enabled him to thus far overcome the fears and traditions of ages.

“The curse is laid on infidels who invade the city,” answered Nuredin, “not on the Faithful; see, we have overcome our foes in this chamber. Now behold: unharmed I take the Fire of Asshurbanipal!”

And striding boldly up the marble steps he took up the great gem which gleamed and shimmered like a living flame in his hand. The Arabs held their breath; Yar Ali, conscious at last, groaned dismally, and Steve cursed sickly to himself. Worse than the threat of torture and death, worse than the throbbing of his wounded shoulder was the sight of his enemy seizing the treasure of which he had dreamed — for which he and Yar Ali had striven and bled.

God, what a barbaric scene — the thought came to him, even in his rage and savage disappointment — bound captives on the marble floor, wild warriors clustered about, gripping their weapons, the acrid scent of blood and burnt powder still lingering in the air, corpses strewn in a horrid welter of blood, brains and entrails — and on the dais, upon whose red-stained steps sprawled the body of the Arab that Steve had brained, beside the skull-adorned throne — the hawk-faced sheikh, oblivious to all except the evil crimson glow in his hand.

Nuredin was like one hypnotized, as all the slumbering mysticism and mystery of his Semitic blood were stirred to the deeps of his strange soul.

“The heart of all evil,” murmured the sheikh, holding the magnificent stone up to the light where its gleams almost dazzled

the eyes of the awed beholders. “How many princes died for thee in the dawns of the Beginnings of Happenings? What fair bosoms didst thou adorn, and what kings held thee as now I hold thee? Surely, blood went into thy making, the blood of kings surely throbs in thy shining and the heart-flow of queens in thy splendor. The brazen trumpets flared and the standards flamed in the sun; the deserts shook to the chanting of the chariots; sultans roared and revelled. Thou blazed above all. The worm gnawed the root, the sword cleft the bosom, the lizard crawled in the palaces of kings. Thy owners and they that wore thee, princesses and sultans and generals, they are dust and are forgotten, but thou blazest with majesty undimmed, fire of the world. Thou art Life itself, deathless and undying, as thou shalt be when I, thy master now, am as this moldering skull —”

Nuredin carelessly struck the skull which crumbled at his touch. And instantly he stiffened and reeled, while a hideous scream tore through his bearded lips — a shriek that was answered by a wild medley of yells as his warriors burst toward the door in wild flight. For a blind man could see that Death had set his seal suddenly on the brow of Nuredin el Mekru. Even his Yemen ruffians joined in the general stampede, and while their sheikh writhed and gibbered wordlessly, the band jammed in a battling, screeching mass in the doorway, tore through and raced madly down the wide stairs.

Steve and Yar Ali, watching wild-eyed, saw Nuredin flail the air desperately with his left arm, about which a mottled bracelet seemed to have grown, then with mouth gaping in agony and eyes glaring, the Arab stumbled and pitched headlong from the steps to crash on the marble floor where he lay still.

The adventurers, flesh crawling, saw an evil-eyed adder untwine itself from about the dead man’s wrist and crawl away. The sheikh lay motionless, still gripping the Fire of Asshurbanipal which cast a sinister radiance over his corpse.

“God is God and Muhammad his Prophet!” breathed Yar Ali fearsomely. “The dogs have fled and they will not return.”

Steve, listening closely, heard no sound. Truly, it had seemed to those wild nomads that the ancient curse had fallen on the profaner.

“Lie still, Steve sahib,” said the Afridi, “a little shifting of my body and I can reach thy cords with my teeth.”

An instant later Steve felt Yar Ali’s powerful teeth at work on his bonds and in a comparatively short time his hands were free. Rising to a sitting position then, he freed his ankles, working awkwardly because his left arm was practically useless. Then he freed Yar Ali, and the big Afghan rose stiffly and stretched.

“By the fangs of the devils,” he swore, “may evil descend on them. Thy shoulder, sahib, let me see to it — by Allah, those dogs dealt sorely with us; I can scarcely move, such a beating they gave me.”

“Wait,” Steve stepped suddenly to a window.

“Just like I thought,” he grunted. “I can see into the city from this window. The Arabs have ridden clean out of sight, I reckon. But look, they went in such a confounded hurry they didn’t stop for the horses of the men we killed! There they stand, tied in the shade of that ruined wall. And I can see canteens and food pouches fastened on the saddles!”

“God is great!” exclaimed Yar Ali, preparing to bandage Steve as best he could.

“A fightin’ chance!” Steve felt like whooping and doing a horn pipe in his dizzy flood of exultation. “Horses, water and food — we’ve got a chance to reach the coast! You’re beat to a pulp and I’ve got a slug in my shoulder, but nothin’ can stop us now!”

He stepped toward the fallen sheikh.

“Wait, sahib!” Yar Ali interposed. “Are you mad, that you would touch one on whom the curse has fallen?”

“Bosh; a snake bit the sheikh. As for that old curse — likely the people of Kara-Shehr died of a plague. The taint remained in the houses for years and the Arabs who came here died too.”

Steve stooped and stolidly wrenched the great gem from the dead hand.

“An adder’d crawled inside the skull — the sheikh clapped his hand down on it, the skull crumbled to dust and the snake just naturally sank his fangs into the nearest object.

“A beauty, eh, Ali?” Steve held up the gem admiringly, gloating over its luster and sheen. “We’re rich men. I’m no judge of jewels, but I bet this gem will bring a fabulous price anywhere. A curse — bosh! But you know, Ali,” he ruminated, “I’ll admit — it is kind of strange that an adder should happen to be sleepin’ in that skull just at that particular time.”

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Miscellanea

Three-Bladed Doom
Untitled Fragment

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Three-Bladed Doom

I

"The knife! Allah! The knife!"

It was the scruff of swift and stealthy feet in the darkened doorway he had just passed that warned Gordon. He wheeled just in time to see a tall figure lunging at him from that black arch. It was dark in the narrow, alley-like street, but Gordon glimpsed a fierce bearded face, the gleam of steel in the lifted hand, even as he avoided the blow with a twist of his whole body. The knife ripped his shirt and before the assassin could recover his balance, the American caught his arm and crashed the long barrel of his heavy pistol down on the fellow's head. The man crumpled to the earth without a sound.

Gordon stood over him, listening with tense expectancy. Up the street, around the next corner, he caught the shuffle of sandalled feet, the muffled clink of steel. These sinister sounds told him the nighted streets of Kabul were a death-trap for Francis Xavier Gordon. He hesitated, half lifting the big gun, then shrugged his shoulders and hurried down the street, swerving wide of the dark arches that gaped in the walls which lined it. He turned into another, wider street, and a few moments later rapped softly on a door above which burned a brass lantern.

The door opened almost instantly and Gordon stepped quickly inside.

"Lock the door!"

The tall bearded Afridi who had admitted the American shot home the heavy bolt and turned, tugging his beard perturbedly as he inspected his friend.

"Your shirt is gashed under the arm, El Borak!" he rumbled.

"A man tried to knife me," answered Gordon. "Others followed."

The Afridi's fierce eyes blazed and he laid a sinewy hand on the three-foot Khyber knife that jutted from his hip.

"Let us sally forth and slay the dogs, *sahib*!" he urged.

Gordon shook his head. He was not a large man, but his thick chest, corded neck and square shoulders hinted at strength, speed and endurance almost primordial in nature.

"Let them go. They're the enemies of Baber Khan, who knew that I went to the Amir tonight to urge him to pardon the man."

"And what said the Amir?"

"He's determined on Baber Khan's destruction. The chief's enemies have poisoned the Amir against him, and then Baber Khan's stubborn. He's refused to come to Kabul and answer charges of sedition. The Amir swears he'll march within the week and lay Khor in ashes and take Baber Khan's head, unless the chief comes in voluntarily and surrenders. Baber Khan's enemies don't want him to do that. They know the charges they've made against him wouldn't stand up, with me defending his case. That's why they're trying to put me out of the way, but they don't dare strike openly.

"I'm going to see if I can't persuade Baber Khan to come in and surrender."

"That the chief of Khor will never do," predicted the Afridi.

"Probably not. But I'm going to try. Wake up Ahmed Shah and get the horses ready while I throw a pack together."

The Afridi did not comment on the risk of night-travel in the Hills, or mention the lateness of the hour. Men who ride with El Borak are accustomed to hard riding at all ungodly hours.

"What of the Sikh?" he asked as he turned away.

"He remains at the palace. The Amir trusts Lal Singh more than his own guards, and he's been nervous ever since the Sultan of Turkey was attacked by that fanatic. Hurry up, Yar Ali Khan. Baber Khan's enemies are probably watching the house, but they don't know about that door that lets into the alley behind the stables. We'll slip out that way."

The huge Afridi strode into an inner chamber and shook the man sleeping there on a heap of carpets.

"Awake, son of *Shaitan*. We ride westward."

Ahmed Shah, a stocky Yusufzai, sat up, yawning.

"Where?"

"To the Ghilzai village of Khor, where the rebel dog Baber Khan will doubtless cut all our throats," growled Yar Ali Khan.

Ahmed Shah grinned broadly as he rose.

"You have no love for the Ghilzai; but he is El Borak's friend."

Yar Ali Khan scowled and muttered direly in his beard as he stalked out into the inner courtyard and headed for the stables. These lay within the high enclosure, and no one but the members of Gordon's "family" knew that a hidden door connected them with an outer alley. So all the shadowy figures that lurked about his house that night were watching the other sides of the compound when the small party moved stealthily down the black alley. Within half an hour from the time Gordon rapped at his door, the clink of hoofs on the rocky road beyond the city wall marked the passing of three men who rode swiftly westward.

Meanwhile in the palace the Amir of Afghanistan was proving the adage concerning the uneasiness of the head that wears the crown.

He emerged from an inner chamber, wearing a pre-occupied expression, and absently returned the salute of a tall, magnificently-shouldered Sikh who clicked his booted heels and came to military attention. The Amir turned up the corridor, indicating with a gesture that he wished to be alone, so Lal Singh saluted again and fell back, resuming his station by the door, one hand absently caressing the sharkskin-bound hilt of his long saber.

His dark eyes followed the Amir up the corridor. He knew that his friend El Borak had been closeted with the king for several hours, and had left with an abruptness that hinted at anger.

This interview was likewise on the Amir's mind as he entered a large lamp-lit chamber and crossed toward a gold-barred window

that overlooked the sleeping city. It was the first rift in his relationship with the American, who acted as unofficial advisor, counsel, ambassador and secret service department. Hedged in by powerful nations which used his mountain kingdom as a pawn in their game of empire, the Amir leaned heavily on the western adventurer who had proved his reliability scores of times in the past.

The Amir frowned, from his troubled spirit, glancing idly at a curtain which masked an alcove, and absently reflecting that the wind must be rising, since the tapestry swayed lightly. He glanced at the gold-barred window and instantly went cold all over. The light curtains there hung motionless. Yet the hangings over the alcove had stirred —

The Amir was a powerful man, with plenty of personal courage. Almost instinctively he sprang, seized the tapestries and tore them apart — a dagger in a dark hand licked from between them and smote him full in the breast. He cried out as he went down, dragging his assailant with him. The man snarled like a wild beast, his dilated eyes glaring madly. His dagger ribboned the Amir's *khalat*, revealing the mail shirt which had saved the ruler's life more than once.

Outside a deep shout echoed the Amir's lusty yells for help, and booted feet pounded down the corridor. The Amir had grasped his attacker by the throat and the knife-wrist, but the man's stringy muscles were like knots of steel. As they rolled on the floor the dagger, glancing from the links of the mail shirt, fleshed itself in arm, thigh and hand. Then, as the bravo heaved the weakening ruler under him, grasped his throat and lifted the knife again, something flashed in the lamp-light like a jet of blue lightning, and the murderer collapsed, his head split to the teeth.

"Your majesty — my lord — !" Lal Singh was pale under his black beard. "Are you slain? Nay, you bleed! Wait!"

He thrust the corpse aside and lifted the Amir. The ruler was gasping for breath and covered with blood, his own and his

attacker's. He sank on a divan and the Sikh began ripping strips of silk from the hangings to bind his wounds.

"Look!" gasped the Amir, pointing. His face was livid, his hand shook. "The knife! Allah, the knife!"

It lay glinting dully by the dead man's hand — a curious weapon with *three* blades sprouting from the same hilt. Lal Singh started and swore beneath his breath.

"The Triple-Bladed Dagger!" panted the Amir, a terrible fear flooding his eyes. "The same weapon that struck at the Sultan of Turkey! The Shah of Persia! The Nizam of Hyderabad!"

"The mark of the Hidden Ones!" muttered Lal Singh, uneasily eyeing the ominous symbol of the terrible cult which within the past year had struck again and again at the men occupying the high places of the East.

The noise had roused the palace. Men were running down the corridors, shouting to know what had happened.

"Shut the door!" exclaimed the Amir. "Admit no one but the major domo of the palace!"

"But we must have a physician, your majesty," protested the Sikh. "These wounds will not slay of themselves, but the dagger might have been poisoned."

"Then send someone for a *hakim. Ya allah!* The Hidden Ones have marked me for doom!" The Amir was a brave man, but his experience had shaken him terribly. "Who can fight the dagger in the dark, the serpent underfoot, the poison in the wine-cup?

"Lal Singh, go swiftly to El Borak's house and tell him I have desperate need of him! Bring him to me! If there is one man in Afghanistan who can protect me from these hidden devils, it is he!"

Lal Singh saluted and hurried from the chamber, shaking his head at the sight of fear in the countenance where fear had never showed before.

There was reason in the Amir's fear. A strange and terrible cult had risen in the East. Who its members were, what their ultimate

purpose was, none knew. They were called the Hidden Ones, and they slew with a three-bladed dagger. That was all that was known about them. Their agents appeared suddenly, struck and disappeared, or else were slain, refusing to be taken alive. Some considered them to be merely religious fanatics. Others believed their activities to possess a political significance. Lal Singh knew that not even Gordon had any definite information about them. And the Sikh was pessimistic of even El Borak's being able to protect the Amir from these slinking hounds of death, who moved like shadows in the night.

THREE days after his hurried departure from Kabul, Gordon sat cross-legged in the trail where it looped over the rock ridge to follow the slope down to the village of Khor.

"I stand between you and death!" he warned the man who sat opposite him.

This man tugged his purple-stained beard reflectively. He was broad and powerful and his Bokhariot girdle bristled with dagger hilts. And he was Baber Khan, chief of the fierce Ghilzai, and absolute overlord of Khor and its three hundred wild swordsmen.

But there was no hint of arrogance in his answer.

"Allah favor thee! Yet what man can pass the spot of his death?"

"I offer you an opportunity to make your peace with the Amir."

Baber Khan shook his head with the fatalism of his race.

"I have too many enemies at court. If I went to Kabul the Amir would listen to their lies, and would hang me up in an iron cage for the kites to eat. Nay, I will not go!"

"Then take your people and find another abode. There are places in these Hills where not even the Amir could follow you."

Baber Khan glanced down the rocky slope to the cluster of mud-and-stone towers that rose above the encircling wall. His thin nostrils expanded and into his eyes came a dark flame like that of an eagle which surveys its aerie.

“Nay, by Allah! My clan has held Khor since the days of Akbar. Let the Amir rule in Kabul. This is *mine!”*

“The Amir will likewise rule in Khor,” grunted Yar Ali Khan, squatting behind Gordon, with Ahmed Shah.

Baber Khan glanced in the other direction where the trail disappeared to the east between jutting crags. On these crags bits of white cloth were blown out on the wind, which the watchers knew were the garments of the riflemen who guarded the pass day and night.

“Let him come,” said Baber Khan grimly. “We hold the passes.”

“He’ll bring five thousand men, with artillery,” warned Gordon. “He’ll burn Khor and take your head back to Kabul.”

“Inshallah,” agreed Baber Khan, indomitable fatalistic.

As so often in the past Gordon fought down a rising anger at this invincible Oriental characteristic. Every instinct of his strenuous nature was a negation of this inert philosophy. But just now the matter seemed at a dead-lock, and he said nothing, but sat staring at the western crags where the sun hung, a ball of fire in the sharp windy blue.

Baber Khan, supposing that Gordon’s silence signified recognition of defeat, dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand, and said: *“Sahib*, there is something I desire to show you. Down in yonder ruined hut which stands outside the wall, there lies a dead man, the like of which was never seen by any man of Khor before. Even in death he is strange and evil, and I think he is no natural man at all, but a —”

The sharp spang of a rifle-shot echoed among the crags to the east, and instantly all four men were on their feet, facing that way.

A shift in the wind brought the sound of angry shouting to them. Then a figure appeared on the cliffs, leaping agiley from ledge to ledge. He danced like a mountain devil, brandishing his rifle; his ragged cloak whipped out on the wind.

“Ohai, Baber Khan!” he yelled, straining above the gusts. “A Sikh on a foundered horse is beyond the pass! He demands speech with El Borak!”

“A Sikh?” snapped Gordon, stiffening. “Let him through, at once!”

Baber Khan relayed the command in a bellow that vibrated among the cliffs, and the man swarmed back up the ledges. Presently a man appeared in the pass on a horse which seemed ready to drop at each step. Its head drooped and its coat was plastered with foam and sweat.

“Lal Singh! What are you doing here?”

“By Krishna, *sahib,”* the Sikh grimaced as he slid stiffly to the ground. “Well are you named El Borak the Swift! I do not think you were more than an hour ahead of me when I rode out of Kabul, but strive as I would, on a fresh horse seized at every village I passed, I could not overtake you.”

“Your news must be urgent, Lal Singh.”

“It is, *sahib,”* the Sikh assured him. “The Amir sent me after you to beg you to return instantly to Kabul. The Triple-Bladed Doom has struck!”

Gordon’s hard body tensed as that of a hound which scents peril in the wind. “Tell me about it!” he commanded, and in a few terse words Lal Singh sketched the attack on the Amir.

“At your quarters I learned you had departed for Khor,” said Lal Singh. “I returned to the palace and the Amir urged me to follow you and bring you back. He was sick of his wounds, and nearly dead with terror.”

“Did he say anything about the expedition he planned to lead against Khor?” asked Gordon.

“Nay, *sahib*. But I think he will not leave the palace until you return. Certainly not until his wounds heal, if indeed he does not die of the poison with which the dagger blades were smeared.”

“You have received a repreive of Fate,” said Gordon to Baber Khan, and to Lal Singh he said: “Come down to the village, eat and

sleep. We'll start for Kabul at dawn."

As the five men started down the slope, with the weary horse plodding after them, Baber Khan asked Gordon: "What is your thought, El Borak?"

"That somebody's pulling strings in Constantinople, or in Moscow, or in Berlin," answered the American.

"So? I deemed these Hidden Ones mere fanatics."

"More than that, I fear," said Gordon. "Apparently it's a secret society with anarchistic principles. But I've noticed that every ruler who's been killed or attacked has been an ally or a friend of the British empire. So I believe some European power is behind them.

"But what were you going to show me?"

"A corpse in a broken hut!" Baber Khan turned aside and led them toward the hovel. "My warriors came upon him lying at the base of a cliff from which he had fallen or been thrown. I made them bring him here, but he died on the way, babbling in a strange tongue. My people feared it would bring a curse on the village. They deem him a magician, and with good cause.

"A long day's journey southward, among mountains so wild and barren not even a Pathan could dwell among them, lies a country we call *"Ghulistan."*

"Ghulistan!" Gordon echoed the sinister phrase. In Turkish or Tatar it means Land of Roses, but in Arabic it means The Country of the Ghouls.

"Aye! An evil region of black crags and wild gorges, shunned by wise men. It seems uninhabited, yet men dwell there — men or demons. Sometimes a man is slain or a child or woman stolen from a lonely trail, and we know it is their work. We have followed, have glimpsed shadowy figures moving through the night, but always the trail ends against a blank cliff through which only a demon could pass. Sometimes we have heard the voice of the *djinn* echoing among the crags. It is a sound to turn men's hearts to ice."

They had reached the ruined hut, and Baber Khan pulled open the sagging door. A moment later the five men were bending over a figure which sprawled on the dirt floor.

It was a figure alien and incongruous: that of a short, squat man with broad, square, flat features, colored like dark copper, and narrow slant eyes — an unmistakable son of the Gobi. Blood clotted the thick black hair on the back of his head, and the unnatural position of his body told of shattered bones.

“Has he not the look of a magician?” asked Baber Khan uneasily.

“He’s no wizard,” answered Gordon. “He’s a Mongol, from a country far to the east. But what he’s doing here is more than I can say —”

Suddenly his black eyes blazed, and he snatched and tore the blood-stained *khalat* away from the squat throat. A stained woolen shirt came into view, and Yar Ali Khan, looking over Gordon’s shoulder, grunted explosively. On the shirt, worked in thread so crimson it might at first glance have been mistaken for a splash of blood, appeared a curious emblem: a human fist grasping a hilt from which jutted three double-edged blades.

“The Triple-Bladed Knife!” whispered Baber Khan, recoiling from that dread symbol which had come to embody a harbinger of death and destruction to the rulers of the East.

All looked at Gordon, but he said nothing. He stared down at the sinister emblem trying to capture a vague train of associations it roused — dim memories of an ancient and evil cult which used that same symbol, long ago.

“Can you have your men guide me to the spot where you found this man, Baber Khan?” he asked at last.

“Aye, *sahib*. But it is an evil place. It is in the Gorge of Ghosts, close to the borders of *Ghulistan*, and —”

“Good. Lal Singh, you and the others go and sleep. We ride at dawn.”

“To Kabul, *sahib?”*

"No. To *Ghulistan."*

"Then you think — ?"

"I think nothing — yet; I go in search of knowledge."

II
The Black Country

Dusk was mantling the serrated sky-line when Gordon's Ghilzai guide halted. Ahead of them the rugged terrain was broken by a deep canyon and beyond the canyon rose a forbidding array of black crags and frowning cliffs, a wild, hag-like chaos of broken black rock.

"There begins *Ghulistan,"* said the Ghilzai, and his hook-nosed comrades loosened their knives and clicked their rifle-bolts. "Beyond that gorge, the Gorge of Ghosts, begins the country of horror and death. We go no further, *sahib."*

Gordon nodded, his eyes picking out a trail that looped down rugged slopes into the canyon. It was the fading trace of an ancient road they had been following for many miles, but it looked as if it had been used frequently, and lately.

The Ghilzai nodded, divining his thought.

"That trail is well-traveled, of late. By it the demons of the black mountains come and go. But men who follow it will not return."

Yar Ali Khan jeered, though he secretly shared their superstitions. "What need demons with a trail?"

"When they take the shape of men they walk like men," Ahmed Shah grunted in his bushy beard.

"Demons fly with wings like a bat!" asserted Yar Ali Khan.

The Ghilzai ignored the Afridi, and pointed to the jutting ledge over which the trail wound.

"At the foot of that slope we found the man you called a Mongol. Doubtless his brother demons quarreled with him and cast him down."

“Doubtless he tripped and fell,” grunted Gordon. “Mongols are desert men. They’re not used to mountain climbing, and their legs are bowed and weakened by a life in the saddle. Such a one would stumble easily on a narrow trail.”

“If he was a man, perhaps,” conceded the Ghilzai. “I still say — *Allah!”*

All except Gordon started convulsively, and the Ghilzais turned pale and threw up their rifles, glaring wildly. Out over the crags, from the south, rolled an incredible sound — a strident, braying roar that vibrated among the mountains.

“The voice of the *djinn!”* ejaculated the Ghilzai, unconsciously jerking the rein so his horse squealed and reared. *“Sahib*, in the name of Allah, let us begone! It is madness to remain here!”

“Go back to your village if you are afraid. I’m going on.”

“Baber Khan will weep for thee!” the leader of the band yelled reproachfully over his shoulder as he kicked his pony into a wild run. “He loves thee like a brother! There will be woe in Khor! *Aie! Ahai! Ohee!”* His lamentations died away amidst the clatter of hoofs on stone as the Ghilzais, flogging their ponies hard, topped a ridge and vanished from view.

“Run, sons of noseless dams!” yelled Yar Ali Khan. “We will brand your devils and drag them to Khor by their tails!” But he fell mute the instant the victims were out of hearing.

Ahmed Shah shifted nervously in his saddle, and Yar Ali Khan tugged at his patriarchal beard and eyed Gordon sidewise, like an apprehensive ghoul with a three-foot knife. But El Borak spoke to Lal Singh: “Have you ever heard a sound like that before?”

The tall Sikh nodded.

“Yes, *sahib*, in the mountains of the devil-worshippers.”

Gordon lifted his reins without comment. He too had heard the roar of the ten-foot bronze trumpets that blare over the bare black mountains of forbidden Mongolia, in the hands of shaven-headed priests of Erlik.

Yar Ali Khan snorted. He had not heard those trumpets, and he had not been consulted. He thrust his horse in ahead of Lal Singh, so as to be next to Gordon as they rode down the steep slopes in the purple dusk. He bared his teeth at the Sikh, and said roughly to Gordon: “Now that we have been lured into this country of devils by treacherous Ghilzai dogs who will undoubtedly steal back and cut the *sahib’s* throat while he sleeps, what have you planned for us?”

It might have been a gaunt old wolfhound growling at his master for patting another dog. Gordon bent his head and spat to hide a grin.

“We’ll camp in the canyon tonight,” he said. “The horses are tired, and there’s no point in struggling through these gulches in the dark. Tomorrow we’ll begin our exploring.

“That Mongol must have been on foot when he fell. If he’d been on a horse, he wouldn’t have fallen unless the horse fell too. The Ghilzai didn’t find a dead horse. And being afoot, it’s certain that he wasn’t far from some camp. A Mongol wouldn’t walk far, if he could help it.

“I believe that the Hidden Ones have a rendezvous somewhere in that country across the gorge. The Hills hereabouts are very thinly settled. Khor is the nearest village, and it’s a long hard day’s ride away, as we’ve found. Wandering clans stay out of these parts, fearing the Ghilzais; and Baber Khan’s men are too superstitious to investigate much across that gorge. The Hidden Ones, hiding over there somewhere, could come and go almost undetected. That old road we’ve been following most of the day used to be a caravan route, centuries ago, and it’s still practicable for men on horses. Better still, it doesn’t pass near any villages, and isn’t used by the tribes now. Men following it could get to within a day’s ride of Kabul without much fear of being seen by anyone.

“I don’t know just what we’ll do. We’ll keep our eyes open and await developments. Our actions will depend on circumstances. Our destiny,” said Gordon without cynicism, “is on Allah’s knees.”

"*La illaha illulah; Muhammad rassoul ullah!"* agreed Yar Alik Khan sonorously, completely mollified.

As they came down into the canyon they saw that the trail led across the rock-strewn floor and into the mouth of a deep, narrow gorge which debouched into the canyon from the south. The south wall of the canyon was higher than the north wall, and much more sheer. It swept up in a sullen rampart of solid black rock, broken at intervals by narrow gorge mouths. Gordon rode into the gulch in which the trail wound and followed it to the first bend, finding that bend was but the first of a succession of kinks. The ravine, running between sheer walls of rock, writhed and twisted like the track of a serpent and was already filled to the brim with darkness.

"This is our road, tomorrow," said Gordon, and his men nodded silently, as he led them back to the main canyon, where some light still lingered, ghostly in the thickening dusk. The clang of their horses' hoofs on the flint seemed startlingly loud in the sullen, brutish silence.

A few hundred feet west of the trail-ravine another, narrower gulch opened into the canyon. Its rock floor showed no sign of any trail, and it narrowed so rapidly that Gordon believed it ended in a blind alley.

About half way between these ravine mouths, but near the north wall, which was at that point precipitous, a tiny spring bubbled up in a natural basin of age-hollowed rock. Behind it, in a cave-like niche in the cliff, dry wiry grass grew sparsely, and there they tethered the weary horses. They camped at the spring, eating from tins, not risking a fire which might be seen from afar by hostile eyes — though they realized that there was a chance that they had been seen by hidden watchers already. There is always that chance in the Hills. The tents had been left in Khor. Blankets spread on the ground were luxuries enough for Gordon and his hardy followers.

His position seemed a strategic one. The party could not be attacked from the north, because of the sheer cliffs; no one could

reach the horses without first passing through the camp. Gordon made provisions against surprize from the south, east or west.

He divided his party into two watches. Lal Singh he placed on guard west of the camp, near the mouth of the narrower ravine, and Ahmed Shah had his station close to the mouth of the eastern ravine. Any hostile band coming up or down the canyon, or entering it from either ravine would have to pass these sentries, whose vigilance Gordon had proven many times in the past. Later in the night he and Yar Ali Khan would take their places.

Darkness came swiftly in the canyon, seeming to flow in almost tangible waves down the black slopes, and ooze out of the blacker mouths of the ravines. Stars blinked out, cold, white and impersonal. Above the invaders brooded the great dusky bulks of the broken mountains, and as Gordon fell asleep he was wondering what grim spectacles they had witnessed since the beginning of Time, and what inhuman creatures had crept through them before Man was.

Primitive instincts, slumbering in the average man, are whetted to razor-edge by a life of constant hazard. Gordon awoke the instant Yar Ali Khan touched him, and at once, before the Afridi spoke, the American knew that peril was in the air. The tense grasp on his shoulder spoke plainly to him of imminent danger.

He came up on one knee instantly, gun in hand.

"What is it?"

Yar Ali Khan crouched beside him, gigantic shoulders bulking dimly in the gloom. The Afridi's eyes glimmered like a cat's in the dark. Back in the shadow of the cliffs the unseen horses moved restively, the only sound in the nighted canyon.

"Danger, *sahib*!" hissed the Afridi. "Close about us, creeping upon us in the dark! *Ahmed Shah is slain!*"

"What?"

"He lies near the mouth of the ravine with his throat cut from ear to ear. I dreamed that death was stealing upon us as we slept, and

the fear of the dream awoke me. Without rousing you I stole to the mouth of the eastern ravine, and lo, there lay Ahmed Shah in his blood. He must have died silently and suddenly. I saw no one, heard no sound in the ravine, which was as black as the mouth of hell.

"Then I hastened along the south wall to the western ravine, and found no one! I speak truth, Allah be my witness. Ahmed is dead and Lal Singh is gone. The devils of the hills have slain one and snatched away the other, without waking us — we who sleep lightly as cats! No sound came from the ravine before which the Sikh had his post. I saw nothing, heard nothing; but I *sensed* Death skulking there. *Sahib*, what *men* could have done away with such warriors as Lal Singh and Ahmed Shah without a sound? This gorge is indeed the Gorge of Ghosts!"

Gordon made no reply, but crouched on his knee, straining eyes and ears into the darkness, while he considered the astounding thing that had occurred. It did not occur to him to doubt the Afridi's statements. He could trust the man as he trusted his own eyes and ears. That Yar Ali Khan could have stolen away without awakening even him was not surprizing, for the Afridi was of that breed of men who glide naked through the mists to steal rifles from the guarded tents of the English army. But that Ahmed Shah should have died and Lal Singh been spirited away without the sound of a struggle smacked of the diabolical.

"Who can fight devils, *sahib*? Let us mount the horses and ride —"

"Listen!"

Somewhere a bare foot scruffed on the rock floor. Gordon rose, peering into the gloom. Men were moving out there in the darkness. Shadows detached themselves from the black background and slunk forward. Gordon drew the scimitar he had buckled on at Khor, thrusting his pistol back into its scabbard. Lal Singh was a captive out there, possibly in line of fire. Yar Ali Khan crouched beside him, gripping his Khyber knife, silent now, and deadly as a wolf at bay, convinced that they were facing ghoulish fiends of the dark mountains, but ready to fight men or devils, if Gordon so willed it.

The dim-seen line moved in slowly, widening as it came, and Gordon and the Afridi fell back a few paces to have the rock wall at their backs, and prevent themselves from being surrounded by those phantom-like figures.

The rush came suddenly, impetuously, bare feet slapping softly over the rocky floor, steel glinting dully in the dim starlight. The men at bay could make out few details of their assailants — only the bulks of them, and the shimmer of steel. They struck and parried by instinct and feel as much as by sight.

Gordon killed the first man to come within sword-reach, and Yar Ali Khan, galvanized by the realization that their foes were human after all, sounded a deep yell and exploded in a berserk burst of wolfish ferocity. Towering above the squat figures, his three-foot knife overreached the blades that hacked at him, and its sweep was devastating. Side by side, with the wall at their backs, the two companions were safe from attack on rear or flank.

Steel rang sharp on steel and blue sparks flew, momentarily lighting wild bearded faces. There rose the ugly butcher-shop sound of blades cleaving flesh and bone, and men screamed or gasped death-gurgles from severed jugulars. For a few moments a huddled knot writhed and milled near the rock wall. The work was too swift and blind and desperate to allow much consecutive thought or plan. But the advantage was with the men at bay. They could see as well as their attackers; man for man, they were stronger and more agile; and they knew when they struck their steel would flesh itself only in enemy bodies. The others were handicapped by their numbers, and the knowledge that they might kill a companion with a blind stroke must surely have tempered their frenzy.

Gordon, ducking a sword before he realized he had seen it swinging at him, experienced a brief pulse of surprize. Thrice his blade had grated against something yielding but impenetrable. These men were wearing shirts of mail! He slashed where he knew unprotected thighs and heads and necks would be, and men spurted their blood on him as they died.

Then the rush ebbed as suddenly as it had flooded. The attackers gave way and melted like phantoms into the darkness. That darkness had become not quite so absolute. The eastern rims of the canyon were lined with a silvery fire that marked the rising of the moon.

Yar Ali Khan gave tongue like a wolf and charged after the retreating figures, foam of aroused blood-lust flecking his beard. He stumbled over a corpse, stabbed savagely downward before he realized it was a dead man, and then Gordon grabbed his arm and pulled him back. He almost dragged the powerful American off his feet, as he plunged like a lassoed bull, breathing gustily.

"Wait, you idiot! Do you want to run into a trap? Let them go!"

Yar Ali Khan subsided to a wolfish wariness that was no less deadly than his berserk fury, and together they glided cautiously after the vague figures which disappeared in the mouth of the eastern ravine. There the pursuers halted, peering warily into the black depths. Somewhere, far down it, a dislodged pebble rattled on the stone, and both men tensed involuntarily, reacting like suspicious panthers.

"The dogs did not halt," muttered Yar Ali Khan. "They flee still. Shall we follow them?"

He did not speak with conviction, and Gordon merely shook his head. Not even they dared plunge into that well of blackness, where ambushes might make every step a march of death. They fell back to the camp and the frightened horses, which were frantic with the stench of fresh-spilt blood.

"When the moon rises high enough to flood the canyon with light," quoth Yar Ali Khan, "they will shoot us from the ravine."

"That's a chance we must take," grunted Gordon. "Maybe they're not good shots."

With the tiny beam of his pocket flashlight Gordon investigated the four dead men left behind by the attackers. The thin pencil of light moved from face to bearded face, and Yar Ali Khan grunted

and swore: “Devil worshippers, by the beard of Allah! Yezidees! Sons of Melek Taus!”

“No wonder they could creep like cats through the dark,” muttered Gordon, who well knew the uncanny stealth possessed by the people of that ancient and abominable cult which worship the Brazen Peacock on Mount Lalesh the Accursed.

Yar Ali Khan made a sign calculated to exorcise devils which might be expected to be lurking near the place where their votaries had died.

“Come away, *sahib*. It is not fitting that you should touch this carrion. No wonder they stole and slew like the *djinn* of silence. They are children of night and darkness, and they partake of the attributes of the elements which gave them birth.”

“But what are they doing here?” mused Gordon. “Their homeland is in Syria — about Mount Lalesh. It’s the last stronghold of their race, to which they were driven by Christian and Moslem alike. A Mongol from the Gobi, and devil-worshippers from Syria. What’s the connection?”

He grasped the coarse woolen *khalat* of the nearest corpse, and swore down Yar Ali Khan’s instant objections.

“That flesh is accursed,” sulked the Afridi, looking like a scandalized ghoul, with the dripping knife in his hand, and blood trickling down his beard from a broken tooth. “It is not fit for a *sahib* such as thou to handle. If it must be done, let me —”

“Oh, shut up! Ha! Just as I thought!”

The tiny beam rested on the linen jerkin which covered the thick chest of the mountaineer. There gleamed, like a splash of fresh blood, the emblem of a hand gripping a three-bladed dagger.

“Wallah!” Discarding his scruples, Yar Ali Khan ripped the *khalats* from the other three corpses. Each displayed the fist and dagger.

“Are Mongols Muhammadans, *sahib?”* he asked presently.

“Some are. But that man in Baber Khan’s hut wasn’t. His canine teeth were filed to sharp points. He was a priest of Erlik, the Yellow

God of Death. Cannibalism is part of their rituals."

"The man who sought the life of the Turkish Sultan was a Kurd," mused Yar Ali Khan. "Some of them worship Melek Taus, too, secretly. But it was an Arab who slew the Shah of Persia, and a Delhi Moslem who fired at the Viceroy. What would true Muhammadans be doing in a society which includes Mongol pagans and Yezidee devil-worshippers?"

"That's what we're here to find out," answered Gordon, snapping off the electric torch.

They squatted in the shadow of the cliffs, in silence, as the moonlight, weird and ghostly, grew in the canyon, and rock and ledge and wall took shape. No sound disturbed the brooding quiet.

Yar Ali Khan rose at last and stood up etched in the witch-light glow, a fair target for anyone lurking in the ravine-mouth. But no shot followed.

"What now?"

Gordon pointed to dark splotches on the bare rock floor that the moonlight made visible and distinct.

"They've left us a trail a child could follow."

Without a word Yar Ali Khan sheathed his knife and secured his rifle from among the pack-rolls near the blankets. Gordon armed himself in like manner, and also fastened to his belt a coil of thin, strong rope with a short iron hook at one end of it. He had found such a rope invaluable time and again in mountain travel. The moon had risen higher, lighting the canyon, drawing a thin thread of silver along the middle of the ravine. That was enough light for men like Gordon and Yar Ali Khan.

Through the moonlight they approached the ravine-mouth, rifles in hand, limned clearly for any marksmen who, after all, might be skulking there, but ready to take the chances of luck, or fate, or fortune, or whatever it is that decides the destiny of men on blind trails. No shot cracked, no furtive figures flitted among the shadows.

The blood drops sprinkled thickly the rocky floor. Obviously the Yezidees had carried some grim wounds away with them.

Gordon thought of Ahmed Shah, lying dead back there in the canyon without a cairn to cover his body. But the Yusufzai was past hurting, and Lal Singh was a prisoner in the hands of men to whom mercy was unknown. Later the dead could be taken care of; just now the task at hand was to rescue the living — if, indeed, the Yezidees had not already killed their prisoner.

They pushed up the ravine without hesitation, rifles cocked. They went afoot, for they believed their enemies were on foot, unless horses were hidden somewhere up the ravine. The gulch was so narrow and rugged that a horseman would be at a fatal disadvantage in any kind of a fight.

At each bend of the ravine they expected and were prepared for an ambush, but the trail of blood-drops led on, and no figures barred their way. The blood spots were not so thick now, but they were still sufficient to mark the way.

Gordon quickened his pace, hopeful of overtaking the Yezidees, whom now were undoubtedly in flight. They had a long start but if, as he believed, they were carrying one or more wounded men, and were also burdened with a prisoner who would not make things any easier for them than he could help, that lead might be rapidly cut down. He believed the Sikh was alive, since they had not found his body, and if the Yezidees had killed him, they would have had no reason for hiding the corpse.

The ravine pitched steeply upward, narrowing, then widened as it descended and abruptly made a crook and came out into another canyon running roughly east and west, and only a few hundred feet wide. The blood-spattered trail ran straight across to the sheer south wall — and ceased.

Yar Ali Khan grunted. “The Ghilzai dogs spoke truth. The trail stops at a cliff that only a bird could fly over.”

Gordon halted at the foot of the cliff, puzzled. They had lost the trace of the ancient road in the Gorge of Ghosts, but this was the

way the Yezidees had come, without a doubt. Blood spattered a trail to the foot of the cliffs — then ceased as if those who bled had simply dissolved into thin air.

He ran his eyes up the sheer pitch of the wall which rose straight up for hundreds of feet. Directly above him, at a height of some fifteen feet, a narrow ledge jutted, a mere outcropping some ten or fifteen feet in length and only a few feet wide. It seemed to offer no solution to the mystery. But halfway up to the ledge he saw a dull reddish smear on the rock of the wall.

Uncoiling his rope, Gordon whirled the weighted end about his head and sent it curving upward. The hook bit into the rim of the ledge and held, and Gordon went up it, climbing the thin, smooth strand as swiftly and easily as most men would manipulate a rope-ladder. Skill acquired in the riggings of sailing ships in all the Seven Seas came to his aid here.

As he passed the smear on the stone he confirmed his belief that it was dried blood. A wounded man being hauled up to the ledge, or climbing as he was climbing, might have left such a smear.

Yar Ali Khan, below him, fidgeted with his rifle, trying to get a better view of the ledge, which his pessimistic imagination peopled with assassins lying prone and unseen. But the shelf lay bare when Gordon pulled himself over the edge.

The first thing he saw was a heavy iron ring set deep in the stone above the ledge, out of sight of anyone below. The metal was worn bright as if by the friction of much usage. More blood was smeared thickly at the place where a man would come up over the rim, if he climbed a rope fastened to the ring, or was hoisted.

Yet more blood drops spattered the ledge, leading diagonally across it toward the sheer wall, which showed a great deal of weathering at that point. And Gordon saw something else — the blurred but unmistakable print of bloody fingers on the rock of the wall. He studied the cracks in the rocks for a few minutes, then laid his hand on the wall over the bloody finger-prints, and shoved. Instantly, smoothly, a section of the wall swung inward, and he was

staring into the door of a narrow tunnel, dimly lit by the moon somewhere behind it.

Wary as a stalking panther he stepped into it, and immediately heard a startled yelp from Yar Ali Khan, to whose inadequate view it had seemed that he had simply melted into the solid rock. Gordon emerged head and shoulders to objurgate his astounded follower to silence, and then continued his investigation.

The tunnel was short, and moonlight poured into it from the other end where it opened into a cleft. The moonlight slanted down from above into this cleft, which ran straight for a hundred feet and then made an abrupt bend, blocking further view. It was like a knife-cut through a block of solid rock.

The door through which he had entered was an irregularly-shaped slab of rock, hung on heavy, oiled iron hinges. It fit perfectly into its aperture, and its irregular shape made the cracks appear to be merely seams in the cliff, produced by time and erosion.

A rope ladder made of heavy rawhide was coiled on a small rock shelf just inside the tunnel mouth, and with this Gordon returned to the ledge outside. He drew up his rope and coiled it, then made fast the ladder and let it down, and Yar Ali Khan swarmed up it in a frenzy of impatience to be at his friend's side again.

He swore softly as he comprehended the mystery of the vanishing trail.

"But why was not the door bolted on the inside, *sahib*?"

"Probably men are coming and going constantly. Men outside might need to get through this door mighty bad, without having to yell for somebody to come and let them in. There wasn't a chance in a thousand of it's ever being discovered. I wouldn't have found it if it hadn't been for the blood-marks. At that I was just playing a hunch when I pushed on the rock."

Yar Ali Khan was for plunging instantly into the cleft, but Gordon had become wary. He had not seen or heard anything that would indicate the presence of a sentry, but he did not believe that a people who showed so much ingenuity in concealing the entrance to

their country would leave it unguarded, however slight might be the chance of discovery.

He hauled up the rawhide ladder, coiled it back on the shelf and closed the door, cutting off the circulation of the moonlight and plunging that end of the tunnel into darkness, in which he commanded Yar Ali Khan to wait for him. The Afridi cursed under his breath, but Gordon believed that one man could reconnoiter beyond that cryptic bend better than two. Yar Ali Khan squatted in the darkness by the door, hugging his rifle and muttering anathema, while Gordon went down the tunnel and into the cleft.

This was simply a narrow split in the great solid mass of the cliffs, and an irregular knife-edge of star-lit sky was visible, hundreds of feet overhead. Enough moonlight found its way into the crevice to make it light enough for Gordon's catlike eyes.

He had not reached the bend when a scruffing of feet beyond it reached him. He had scarcely concealed himself behind a broken outcropping of rock that was split away from the side-wall, when the sentry came. He came leisurely, and in the manner of one who performs a routine task perfunctorily, secure in his conviction of the inaccessibility of his retreat. He was a squat Mongol, with a face like a copper mask, and altogether his appearance was not unlike those of the devils of Hill-country legends as he swung along with the wide roll of a horseman, trailing a rifle.

He was passing Gordon's hiding place when some obscure instinct brought him about in a flash, teeth bared in a startled snarl, rifle jumping for a shot from the hip. But even as he turned Gordon was on his feet with the instant uncoiling of steel spring muscles, and as the rifle muzzle leaped to a level, the scimitar lashed down. The Mongol dropped like an ox, his round skull split like a ripe melon.

Gordon froze into statuesque immobility, glaring along the passage. As he heard no sound to indicate the presence of any other guard, he risked a low whistle which brought Yar Ali Khan headlong into the cleft, eyes blazing.

He grunted expressively at the sight of the dead man.

“Yes — another son of Erlik. No telling how many more may be in this defile. We’ll drag him behind these rocks where I hid. Good! Come on, now. If there were any more close by they’d have heard the sound of the blow.”

Gordon was correct. Beyond the bend the long, deep defile ran empty to the next kink. As they advanced without opposition belief that the Mongol had been the only sentry posted in the cleft became certainty. The moonlight in the narrow gash above them was paling when they emerged into the open at last. Here the defile broke into a chaos of shattered rock, and the single gorge became half a dozen, threading between isolated crags and split-off rocks like the many mouths of a river that splits into separate streams at the delta. Crumbling pinnacles and turrets of black stone stood up like gaunt ghosts in the grey light which betrayed the coming of dawn.

Threading their way between these grim sentinels, they presently looked out upon a level, rock-strewn floor that stretched for three hundred yards to the foot of an abrupt cliff. The trail they had been following, grooved by many feet in the weathered stone, crossed the level and twisted a tortuous way up the cliff on ramps cut in the rock. But what lay on top of the cliffs they could not guess. To right and left the solid wall veered away, flanked by the broken pinnacles.

“What now, *sahib?”* In the grey light the Afridi looked like a mountain goblin surprized out of his crag-cave by dawn.

“I think we must be close to — listen!”

Over the cliffs rolled the blaring reverberation they had heard the night before, but now much nearer — the strident roar of the giant trumpet.

“How we been seen?” wondered Yar Ali Khan, working his rifle-bolt.

“That’s on the lap of Allah. But we must see, and we can’t climb that cliff without first knowing what lies above it. Here! This will serve our purpose.”

It was a weathered crag which rose like a tower among its lesser fellows. Any Hill-bred child could have scaled it. The comrades went up it almost as swiftly as if it had been a stairway, being careful to keep its bulk between them and the opposite cliffs, until they reached the summit, which was higher than the cliffs. Then they lay behind a spur of rock, staring through the rosy haze of the rising dawn.

"Allah!" swore Yar Ali Khan, reaching for the rifle slung on his back.

Seen from their vantage point the opposite cliffs assumed their real nature as one side of a gigantic mesa-like block which reminded Gordon of the formations of his native Southwest. It rose sheer from the surrounding level, four to five hundred feet in height, and its perpendicular sides seemed unscalable except at the point where the trail had been laboriously cut into the stone. East, north and west it was girdled by crumbling crags, separated from the plateau by the level canyon floor which varied in width from three hundred yards to half a mile. On the south the plateau abutted on a gigantic, bare mountain whose gaunt peaks dominated the surrounding pinacles.

But the watchers devoted only a glance to the geographical formation, mechanically analyzing and appreciating it. It was a stupefying phenomenon of another nature which gripped their whole attention.

Gordon had not been sure just what he expected to find at the end of the bloody trail. He had anticipated a rendezvous of some sort, certainly: a cluster of horse-hide tents, a cavern, perhaps even a village of mud and stone nestling on a hill-side. But they were looking at a city whose domes and towers glistened in the rosy dawn, like a magic city of sorcerers stolen from some fabled land and set down in this desert spot!

"The city of the *djinn!"* ejaculated Yar Ali Khan, jolted back into his original conception of their enemies. "Allah is my protection against *Shaitan* the Damned!" He snapped his fingers in a gesture older than Muhammad.

The plateau was roughly oval in shape, about a mile and a half in length from north to south, somewhat less than a mile in width from east to west. The city stood near the southern extremity, etched against the dark mountain behind it, its flat-topped stone houses and clustering trees dominated by a large edifice whose purple dome gleamed in the sharp dawn, shot and veined with gold.

“Enchantment and necromancy!” exclaimed Yar Ali Khan, completely upset.

Gordon did not reply, but the Celtic blood in his veins responded to the somber aspect of the scene, the contrast of the gloomy black crags with the masses of green and the sheens of color which were the city. But the city itself woke forebodings of evil. The gleam of its purple, gold-traced dome was sinister. The black, crumbling crags were a fit setting for it. It was like a city of ancient, demoniac mystery, rising amidst ruin and decay, even its splendor an evil glitter.

“This must be the stronghold of the Hidden Ones,” muttered Gordon. “I would have expected to find their headquarters concealed in the native district of some city like Delhi, or Bombay. But this is a logical point. From here they can strike at all the countries of Western Asia, and have a safe hide-out to retire to. But who’d have expected to find a city like that in a country so long supposed to be practically uninhabited?”

“Not even we can fight a whole city,” grunted Yar Ali Khan.

Gordon fell silent while he studied the distant view. The city did not show to be so large as it had appeared at first glance. It was compact, but unwalled. The houses, two or three stories in height, stood among clusters of trees and surprizing gardens — surprizing because the plateau seemed almost solid rock. Gordon reached a decision.

“Ali, go back to our camp in the Gorge of Ghosts. Take the horses and ride for Khor. Tell Baber Khan what’s happened and say to him that I need him and all his swords. Bring the Ghilzai through the cleft and halt them among these defiles until you get a signal from

me, or know I'm dead. Here's a chance to sever two necks with the same stroke. If Baber Khan wipes out this nest of vipers, the Amir will pardon him."

"Shaitan devour Baber Khan! What of thee?"

"I'm going into that city."

"Wallah!" swore the Afridi.

"I've got to. The Yezidees have gone there, and Lal Singh must be with them. They may kill him before the Ghilzai could get here. I've got to get him away before we can lay any plans about attacking the city. If you start now, you can get to Khor shortly after nightfall. If you start back from Khor immediately, you should arrive at this spot shortly after sun-up. If I'm alive and at liberty, I'll meet you here. If I don't, you and Baber Khan use your own judgment."

Yar Ali Khan immediately found objections.

"Baber Khan has no love for me. If I go to him alone he will spit in my beard, and I will kill him and then his dogs will kill me."

"He'll do no such thing, and you know it."

"He will not come!"

"He'd come through Hell if I sent for him."

"His men will not follow him; they fear devils."

"They'll come fast enough when you tell them it's men who haunt *Ghulistan."*

"But the horses will be gone. The devils will have stolen them."

"I doubt it. Nobody's left the city since we took the trail, and no one has come in behind us. Anyway, you can make it to Khor on foot, if necessary, though of course it'll take longer."

Then Yar Ali Khan tore his beard in wrath and voiced his real objection to leaving Gordon.

"The swine in that city will flay you alive!"

"Nay, I will match guile with guile. I'll be a fugitive from the wrath of the Amir, an outlaw seeking sanctuary. The East is full of lies about me. They'll aid me now."

Yar Ali Khan abandoned the argument suddenly, realizing the uselessness of it. Grumbling in his beard, wagging his turbaned head direfully, the Afridi clambered down the crag and vanished in the defile without a backward look.

When he was out of sight Gordon also descended and went toward the cliffs.

III
The Hidden Ones

Gordon expected, at each step, to be fired at from the cliffs, although he had seen no sentinels among the rocks at their crest when he looked from the crag. But he crossed the canyon, reached the foot of the cliff and began mounting the steep road — still flecked here and there with red drops — without having sighted any human being. The trail wound interminably up a succession of ramps, with low, heavy walls on the outer edge. He had time to admire the engineering ability which made that road possible. Obviously it was no work of Afghan hillmen; it looked ancient, strong as the mountain itself.

For the last thirty feet the ramps gave way to a flight of steep steps cut into the rock. Still no one challenged him, and he came out on the plateau among a cluster of boulders, from behind which seven men who had been squatting over a game, sprang to their feet and glared wildly at him. They were Kurds, lean, hard-bodied warriors with hawk-beak noses, their slim waists girdled with cartridge belts, and with rifles in their hands.

Those rifles were instantly levelled at him. Gordon displayed neither surprize nor perturbation. He set his rifle-butt on the ground and eyed the startled Kurds tranquilly.

These cut-throats were as uncertain as cornered wildcats, and therefore equally dangerous and unpredictable. His life hung on the crook of a nervous trigger-finger. But for the moment they merely glared, struck dumb by his unexpected materialization.

“El Borak!” muttered the taller of the Kurds, his eyes blazing with fear and suspicion and murder-lust. “What do you here?”

Gordon ran his eyes leisurely over them all before he replied, an easy, relaxed figure standing carelessly before those seven tense shapes.

“I seek your master,” he replied presently.

This did not seem to reassure them. They began to mutter among themselves, never relaxing the vigilance of eye or trigger-finger.

The taller Kurd’s voice rose irascibly, dominating the others: “You chatter like crows! This thing is plain: we were gambling and did not see him come. Our duty is to watch the Stair. We have failed in our duty. If it is known there will be punishment. Let us slay him and throw him over the cliff.”

“Aye,” agreed Gordon equably. “Do so. And when your master asks: ‘Where is El Borak, who brought me important news?’ Say to him: ‘Lo, thou didst not consult with us concerning this man, and so we slew him to teach thee a lesson!’”

They winced at the biting irony of his words and tone.

“None will ever know,” growled one. “Shoot him.”

“Nay, the shot would be heard and there would be questions to answer.”

“Cut his throat!” suggested the youngest of the band, and was scowled at so murderously by his fellows that he fell back in confusion.

“Aye, cut my throat,” taunted Gordon, laughing at them. “*One* of you might survive to tell of it.”

This was no mere bombast, as most of them knew, and they betrayed their uneasiness in their black scowls.

“Knives are silent,” muttered the youngster, trying to justify himself.

He was rewarded by receiving a rifle butt driven angrily into his belly, which made him salaam involuntarily, and then lift up his

voice in gasping lamentation.

“Son of a dog! Would you have us fight El Borak’s guns with naked steel?”

Having vented some of their spleen on their tactless comrade, the Kurds grew calmer, and the taller man inquired uncertainly of Gordon: “You are expected?”

“Would I come here if I were not expected? Does the lamb thrust his head unbidden into the jaws of the wolf?”

“Lamb?” The Kurds cackled sardonically. “Thou a lamb? Ha, Allah! Say, rather, does the grey wolf with blood on his fangs seek the hunter!”

“If there is fresh-spilt blood it is but the blood of fools who disobeyed their master’s orders,” retorted Gordon. “Last night, in the Gorge of Ghosts —”

“Ya Allah! Was it thee the Yezidee fools fought? They knew thee not! They said they had slain an Englishman and his servants in the Gorge.”

So that was why the sentries were so careless; for some reason the Yezidees had lied about the outcome of that battle, and the Watchers of the Road were not expecting any pursuit.

“None of you was among those who in their ignorance fell upon me in the Gorge?”

“Do we limp? Do we bleed? Do we weep from weariness and wounds? Nay, we have not fought El Borak!”

“Then be wise and do not make the mistake they made. Will you take me to him who awaits me, or will you cast dung in his beard by scorning his orders?”

“Allah forbid!” ejaculated the tall Kurd. “No order had been given us concerning thee. Nay, El Borak, thy heart is full of guile as a serpent’s. But if this be a lie our master shall see thy death, and if it be not a lie, then we can have no blame. Give up thy rifle and scimitar, and we will conduct thee to him.”

Gordon surrendered the weapons, secure in the knowledge of the big pistol reposing in its shoulder scabbard under his left arm.

The leader then picked up the rifle dropped by the young Kurd, who was still bent double and groaning heartily: straightened him with a resounding kick in the rump, shoved the rifle in his hands and bade him watch the Stair as if his life depended on it; then turned, barking orders to the others.

As they closed around the seemingly unarmed American, Gordon knew their hands itched to thrust a knife in his back. But he had sown the seeds of fear and uncertainty in their primitive minds, and he knew they dared not strike.

They moved out of the clustering boulders and started along the wide road that led to the city. That road had once been paved, and in some places the paving was still in fair condition.

“The Yezidess passed into the city just before dawn?” he asked casually.

“Aye,” was the terse reply.

“They couldn’t march fast,” mused Gordon. “They had wounded men to carry. And then the Sikh, their prisoner, would be stubborn. They’d have to beat and prod and drag him.”

One of the men turned his head and began: “Why, the Sikh —”

The tall leader barked him to silence, and turned on Gordon a baleful gaze.

“Do not answer his questions. Ask him none. If he mocks us, retort not. A serpent is less crafty. If we talk to him he will have us bewitched before we reach Shalizahr.”

So that was the name of that fantastic city; Gordon seemed to remember the name in some medieval historical connection.

“Why do you mistrust me?” he demanded. “Have I not come to you with open hands?”

“Aye!” The Kurd laughed mirthlessly. “Once I saw you come to the Turkish masters of Bitlis with open hands; but when you closed those hands the streets ran red. Nay, El Borak, I know you of old,

from the days when you led your outlaws through the hills of Kurdistan. I can not match my wits against yours, but I can keep my tongue between my teeth. You shall not snare me and blind me with cunning words. I will not speak, and if any of my men answer you, I will break his head with my rifle butt."

"I thought I recognized you," said Gordon. "You are Yusuf ibn Suleiman. You were a good fighter."

The Kurd's scarred face lighted at the praise, and he started to speak — then recollected himself, scowled ferociously, swore at one of his men who had not offended in any way, squared his shoulders uncompromisingly, and strode stiffly ahead of the party.

Gordon did not stride; rather he strolled, with the air of a man walking amidst an escort of honor, rather than a guard, and his bearing had its effect on the warriors. By the time they reached the city they were shouldering their rifles instead of carrying them at the ready, and allowing a respectful interval between themselves and him.

As they approached Shalizahr the secret of the groves and gardens became apparent. Soil, doubtless brought laboriously from distant valleys, had been used to fill some of the many depressions which pitted the surface of the plateau, and an elaborate system of deep, narrow irrigation canals threaded the gardens, obviously originating in some natural water supply near the center of the city. The plateau, sheltered by the ring of crumbling peaks, presented a more seasonal climate than was common in those mountains.

The road ran between large orchards and entered the city proper — lines of flat-roofed stone houses fronting each other across the wide, paved street, each with an expanse of garden behind it. There was no wall about the city. The plateau itself was a fortress. Half a mile of ravine-gashed plain separated the city from the mountain which frowned above and behind it. The plateau was like a great shelf jutting out from the massive slope.

Men at work in the gardens and loitering along the street halted and stared at the Kurds and their captive. Gordon saw Druses, many

Persians, Arabs, a few Indians. But no Afghans. Evidently the heterogenous population had no affiliations with the native inhabitants of the land.

The people did not carry their curiosity beyond questioning stares. The street widened into a *suk* closed on the south side by a broad wall which enclosed the palacial building with its gorgeous dome.

There was no guard at the massive bronze-barred gates, only a gay-clad negro who salaamed deeply as he swung open the portals. Gordon and his escort came into a small courtyard paved with colored tile, in the midst of which a fountain bubbled and pigeons fluttered about it. The Kurds marched straight on across the court and were halted on the broad pillared portico by a guard of thirty Arabs whose plumed helmets of silvered steel, gilded corselets and gold-chased scimitars contrasted curiously with the modern rifles in their hands.

The hawk-faced captain of the guard conversed briefly with Yusuf ibn Suleiman, and Gordon divined that no love was lost between them. The captain, whose name was Muhammad ibn Ahmed, presently made a gesture with his slim brown hand, and Gordon was surrounded by a dozen glittering Arabs, and marched among them up the broad marble steps and through the wide arch whose bronze doors stood wide. The Kurds followed, without their rifles, and not looking at all happy.

They passed through wide, dim-lit halls, from the vaulted and fretted ceilings of which hung smoking bronze censers, while on either hand velvet-curtained arches hinted at inner mysteries. Tapestries rustled, soft footfalls whispered, and once Gordon saw a slim white hand grasping a hanging as if the owner peered from behind it.

Even the swagger of the Arabs — all except their captain — was modified. The Kurds were openly uneasy. Mystery and intangible menace lurked in those dim, gorgeous halls. Gordon felt that he

might have been traversing a palace of Nineveh or ancient Persia, but for the modern weapons of his escort.

Presently they emerged into a broader hallway and approached a double-valved bronze door, flanked by even more gorgeously-clad guardsmen, Persians, these, scented and painted like the warriors of Cambyses. These bizarre figures stood impassively as statues while the Arabs strode by with their captive, or guest, and entered a semi-circular room where dragon-worked tapestries covered the walls, hiding all possible doors or windows except the one by which they had entered. Golden lamps hung from the arched ceiling which was worked in fretted gold and ebony. Opposite the great doorway there stood a marble dais. On the dais stood a great canopied chair, scrolled and carved like a throne, and on the velvet cushions which littered the seat lolled a slender figure in a pearl-sewn *khalat*. On the rose-colored turban glistened a great gold brooch, made in the shape of a human hand gripping a three-bladed dagger. The face beneath the turban was oval, the color of old ivory, with a small pointed black beard. The dark eyes were contemplative. The man was a Persian.

On either side of the throne stood a giant Sudanese, like images of heathen gods carved out of black basalt, naked but for sandals and silken loin-cloths, with broad-tipped tulwars in their hands.

"Who is this?" languidly inquired the man on the throne, in Arabic.

"El Borak, *ya sidna!"* answered Muhammad ibn Ahmed, with a swagger in his consciousness that the announcement of that name would create something of a sensation anywhere East of Stamboul.

The dark eyes quickened with interest, sharpened with suspicion, and Yusuf ibn Suleiman, watching his master's face with painful intensity, drew in a quick breath and clenched his hands so the bails bit into the palms.

"How comes he in Shalizahr uannounced?"

"The Kurdish dogs who watch the Stair say he came to them, swearing that he had been sent for by the Shaykh ez Zurim."

Gordon stiffened as he heard that title. It was incredible, fantastic; yet it was true. His black eyes fixed with fierce intensity on the oval face.

He did not speak. There was a time for silence as well as for bold speech. His next move depended entirely on the Shaykh's next words. They might brand him as an imposter and doom him. But he depended on two things: the belief that no Eastern ruler would order El Borak slain without first trying to learn the reason behind his presence; and the fact that few Eastern rulers either enjoy the full confidence of their followers, or themselves wholly trust those followers.

After a pause the man on the throne spoke at, but not to, the Kurd: "This is the law of Shalizahr: no man may ascend the Stair unless he makes the Sign so the Watchers of the Stair can see. If he does not know the Sign, the Warder of the Gate must be summoned to converse with the stranger before he may mount the Stair. El Borak was not announced. The Warder of the Gate was not summoned. Did El Borak make the Sign, below the Stair?"

Yusuf ibn Suleiman sweated as he wavered between a dangerous truth and a lie that might be even more dangerous. He shot a venomous glance at Gordon and spoke in a voice harsh with apprehension: "The guard in the cleft did not give warning. El Borak appeared upon the cliff before we saw him, though we were vigilant as eagles. He is a magician who makes himself invisible at will. We knew he spoke truth when he said you had sent for him, otherwise he could not have known the Secret Way —"

Perspiration beaded the Kurd's narrow forehead. The man on the throne did not seem to hear his voice and Muhammad ibn Ahmed, quick to sense that the Kurd had fallen in disfavor, struck Yusuf savagely in the mouth with his open hand.

"Dog, be silent until the Shaykh deigns to command thy speech!"

Yusuf reeled, blood starting down his beard, and looked black murder at the Arab, but he said nothing.

The Persian moved his hand languidly, yet with impatience.

“Take the Kurds away. Keep them under guard until further orders. Even if a man is expected, the Watchers should not be surprized. El Borak did not know the Sign, yet he climbed the Stair unhindered. If they had been vigilant, not even El Borak could have done this. He is no magician. You have my leave to go. I will talk to El Borak alone.”

Muhammad ibn Ahmed salaamed and led his glittering swordsmen away between the silent files of warriors lined on each side of the door, herding the shivering Kurds before them. These turned as they passed through the door and fixed their burning eyes on Gordon in a silent glare of hate.

Muhammad ibn Ahmed pulled the bronze doors shut behind them. The Persian spoke in English to Gordon.

“Speak freely. These black men do not understand English.”

Gordon, before replying, kicked a divan up before the dais and settled himself comfortably on it, with his feet propped on a velvet footstool. He had not established his prestige in the Orient by meek bearing or timid behavior. Where another man might have tip-toed, hat in hand and heart in mouth, Gordon strode with heavy boots and heavy hand, and because he was El Borak, he lived where other men died. His attitude was no bluff. He was ready at all times to back up his play with hot lead and cold steel, and men knew it, just as they knew that he was the most dangerous man with any sort of weapon between Cairo and Peking.

The Persian showed no surprize that his captive — or guest — should seat himself without asking permission. His first words showed that he had had much dealings with Westerners, and had, for his own purposes, adopted some of their directness. For he said, without preamble: “I did not send for you.”

“Of course not. But I had to tell those fools something, or else kill them all.”

“What do you want here?”

“What does any man want who comes to a nest of outlaws?”

“He might come as a spy,” pointed out the Shaykh.

Gordon laughed at him. “For whom?”

“How did you know the Road?”

Gordon took refuge in the obscurity of Eastern subtlety.

“I followed the vultures; they always lead me to my goal.”

“They should,” was the grim reply. “You have fed them full often enough. What of the Mongol who watched the cleft?”

“Dead; he wouldn’t listen to reason.”

“The vultures follow you, not you the vultures,” commented the Shaykh. “Why did you not send word to me of your coming?”

“Send word by whom? Last night as I camped in the Gorge of Ghosts, resting my horses before I pushed on to Shalizahr, a gang of your fools fell on my party in the darkness, killed one and carried another away. The fourth man was frightened and ran away. I came on alone as soon as the moon rose.”

“They were Yezidees, whose duty it is to watch the Gorge of Ghosts. They did not know you sought me. They limped into the city at dawn, with one man dying and most of the others sorely wounded, and swore that they had slain a *sahib* and his servants in the Gorge of Ghosts. Evidently they feared to admit that they ran away, leaving you alive. They shall smart for their lie. But you have not told me why you came here.”

“I seek refuge. And I bring news. The man you sent to kill the Amir wounded him and was himself cut to pieces by the Uzbek guardsmen.”

The Persian shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

“Your news is stale. We knew that before the noon of the day after the night the execution was attempted. And we have since learned that the Amir will live, because an English physician cleansed the wounds of the poison which was on the dagger.”

That sounded like black magic, until Gordon remembered the pigeons in the courtyard. Carrier birds, of course, and agents in

Kabul to release them with the messages.

“We have kept our secret well,” said the Persian. “Since you knew of Shalizahr and the Road to Shalizahr, you must have been told of it by some one of the Brotherhood. Did Bagheela send you?”

Gordon recognized the trap laid for him and avoided it. He had no idea who Bagheela was, and this question was too obviously a bait an imposter might be tempted to seize.

“I don’t know the man you call Bagheela,” he answered. “I don’t have to be told secrets. I learn them for myself. I came here because I had to have a hideout. I’m out of favor at Kabul, and the English would have me shot if they could catch me.”

One of the most persistent legends in circulation about Gordon is that he is an enemy of the English. This has its basis in his refusal to be awed by gold braid and brass buttons, and in his comings and goings in tranquil disregard of all rules and regulations. He has no reverance for authority which bedecks itself in pomp and arrogance, and as a result is hated by certain types of officials, both civilian and military. But the men who actually rule India are his friends, and have profited by his aid again and again.

But the Persian had no way of knowing this. To the Shaykh El Borak was merely a lawless adventurer, not quite gone native, but still beyond the pale of respectability, and quite likely to fall foul of the government at any time.

He said some thing in scholarly and archaic Persian and Gordon, knowing he would not change the language of their conversation without a subtle reason, feigned ignorance of the tongue. Sometimes Oriental deviousness is childishly transparent.

The Shaykh spoke to one of the blacks, and that giant stolidly drew a silver hammer from his girdle and smote a golden gong hanging by the tapestries. The echoes had scarcely died away when the bronze doors opened long enough to admit a slim man in plain silken robes who stood bowing before the dais — a Persian, like the Shaykh. The latter addressed him as Musa, and questioned him in

the tongue he had just tested on Gordon. Musa replied in the same language.

“Do you know this man?”

“Aye, *ya sidna.”*

“Have our spies included him in their reports?”

“Aye, *ya sidna*. The last despatch from Kabul bore word of him. On the night that your servant attempted to execute the Amir, this man talked with the Amir secretly, an hour or so before the attack was made. After leaving the palace hurriedly, he fled from the city with three men, and was seen riding along the road that leads to the village of the outlaw, Baber Khan of Khor. He was pursued by a horseman from Kabul, but whether he gave up the chase or was slain by the men of Khor, I do not know.”

Gordon, lounging on the divan and showing no sign to betray his understanding of what was being said, realized two things: the spy system of the Hidden Ones was more far-reaching than he had guessed; and a chain of misinterpreted circumstances were working in his favor. It was natural for these men to think that he had fled from Kabul under the shadow of royal displeasure. That he should ride for the village of an outlaw would seem to clinch the matter, as well as the fact of his “pursuit” by a horseman from Kabul — obviously not recognized as Lal Singh.

“You have my leave to go.”

Musa bowed and departed, closing the doors, and the Shaykh meditated in silence for a space. Presently he lifted his head, as if coming to a decision, and said: “I believe you are telling the truth. You fled from Kabul, to Khor, where no friend of the Amir would be welcome. Your enmity toward the English is well known. We need such a man as you. But I can not initiate you into the Brotherhood until Bagheela sees and passes on you. He is not now in Shalizahr, but will be here by tomorrow dawn.

“In the meantime I would like to know how your learned of our society and of our city.”

Gordon shrugged his shoulders.

“I hear the secrets the wind sings as it blows through the branches of the dry tamarisks; and the tales the men of the caravans whisper about the dung-fires in the *serais.”*

“Then you know our purpose? Our ambition?”

“I know what you call yourselves.” Gordon’s answer was purposely ambiguous, for he was groping his way, guided more by intuition and guesswork than by actual knowledge. His sole means of identification of the cult with which he was dealing was the title the Arab had given the Persian — the title of the lord of an ancient and mysterious race. That race and that title had once existed, beyond the shadow of a doubt, but both were clouded by the legends and myths of many centuries.

“Do you know what my title means?” asked the Shaykh suddenly, as if guessing Gordon’s thoughts.

“Shaykh ez Zurim — Lord of the Zurim,” answered Gordon. “The Zurim were a pre-Canaanitish race who lived in Syria before the coming of the Semitic tribes. They were given to heathenish worship and practised all kinds of black magic and human sacrifice. The Israelites destroyed the last remnants of them.”

“So say the historians,” sneered the Shaykh. “But the descendents of the Zurim still dwell in the mountains of Syria.”

“I suspected as much,” said Gordon. “Their practises persisted in a devil-worshipping cult of the same name. I’ve heard tales of it, but until recently I set them all down as legends.”

“Aye!” exclaimed the Persian. “The world deems them legends — but since the Beginning of Happenings the Fire of Zurim has not been wholly extinguished — though for more than a century it smoldered to glowing coals.”

“I’ve always suspected the existence of cults in the East that reach back before the time of Mohammed,” said Gordon, slowly.

“You speak the truth! And the society of the Hidden Ones is the oldest of all. It lies behind and beyond Islam, Buddha or Brahma. It

recognizes no difference in race or religion.

“In the ancient past its branches extended all over the East, from Mongolia to Egypt. Mohammed thought he had destroyed the cult in Arabia, but he only broke one of its branches.

“Men of many races belong, and have belonged, to the society of the Hidden Ones. In the long, long ago the Zurim were only one branch, though from their race the priests of the cult were chosen. In later days the Assassins of Mount Alamut were a branch of the Hidden Ones, as were the Druses who worship the Gold Calf, the Yezidees of Mount Lalesh, and the Mongol Sons of Yellow Erlik. In Egypt, Syria, Persia and India were bands of the cult, cloaked in mystery and only half-suspected by the races among which they dwelt. But as the centuries passed these groups became isolated and fell apart, each branch going its separate way, and each dwindling in strength and importance because of a lack of unity.

“In olden days the Hidden Ones swayed the destinies of empires. They did not lead armies in the field, but they fought by poison and fire and the triple-bladed dagger that bit in the dark. Their scarlet-cloaked emissaries of death went forth to do the bidding of the Shaykh ez Zurim, and kings died in Cairo, in Jerusalem, in Samarcand, in Brusa.

“And I am a descendent of that one who was Shaykh ez Zurim in the days of Saladin — he who was the unseen, unguessed master of Hassan ibn Sabah, the Old Man of the Mountain. All Asia feared the Shaykh al Jebal, but he only did the bidding of the Shaykh ez Zurim!”

A fanatical gleam lit the dark eyes.

“Throughout my youth I dreamed of the former greatness of the cult, into which I was initiated when I was but a child. Wealth that flowed suddenly from the barren lands of my estate — western money that came to me from minerals found there — made the dream become reality. Othman el Aziz became Shaykh ez Zurim, the first to hold the title in a hundred years.

“The creed of the Hidden Ones is broad and deep as the sea, ignoring racial and religious differences, uniting men of opposing sects. Strand by strand I drew together and united the separate branches of the cult. My emissaries travelled throughout Asia, seeking members of the ancient society and finding them — in teeming cities, among barren mountains, in the silence of upland deserts. Slowly, surely, my band has grown, for I have not only united all the various branches of the cult, but have gained new recruits among the bold and desperate spirits of a score of races. All are one before the Fire of Zurim; I have among my followers Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, devil-worshippers.

“Four years ago I came with my followers to this city, then a crumbling mass of ruins, unknown to the hillmen because their superstitious legends made them shun this region. Centuries ago it was a city of the Assassins, and was laid waste by the Mongols. When I came the buildings were crumbled stone, the canals filled with rubble, the groves grown wild and tangled. It took three years to rebuild it, and most of my fortune went into the labor, for bringing material here secretly was tedious and dangerous work. We brought it out of Persia, over the old caravan route from the west, and up an ancient ramp on the western side of the plateau, which I have since destroyed. But at last I looked upon forgotten Shalizahr as it was in the days of the ancient Shaykhs.

“It does no harm for you to know these secrets. If Bagheela does not approve of you, your knowledge will die with you. If he does, then you have learned no more than you will learn in any event as a Hidden One.

“You can rise high in the empire I am building. Three years I was preparing. Then I began to strike. Within the last year my *fedauis* have gone forth with poisoned daggers as they went forth in the old days, knowing no law but my will, incorruptible, invincible.”

“And your ultimate ambition?”

“Have you not guessed it?” The Persian almost whispered it, his eyes wide and blank with his strange fanaticism.

“Who wouldn’t? But I’d rather hear it from your lips.”

“I will rule all Asia! I will control the destinies of the world! Kings on their thrones will be but puppets dancing on my strings. Those who dare disobey my commands shall die! Soon none will dare disobey. All power will be mine. Power! Allah! What is greater under Paradise?”

Gordon did not reply. He was comparing the Shaykh’s repeated references to his absolute power with his remarks concerning the mysterious Bagheela who must decide Gordon’s status. This seemed to indicate that Othman’s authority was not supreme in Shalizahr, after all. Gordon wondered who Bagheela was. The term meant panther, and was probably a title like his own native name of El Borak.

“Where is the Sikh, Lal Singh?” he demanded abruptly. “Your Yezidees carried him away, after they murdered Ahmed Shah.”

Othman’s expression of surprize was overdone.

“I do not know to whom you refer. The Yezidees brought back no captive with them from the Gorge of Ghosts.”

Gordon knew he was lying, but also realized that it would be useless to push his questioning further at that time. He could not imagine why Othman should deny knowledge of the Sikh, whom he was sure had been brought into the city, but it might be dangerous to press the matter, after a formal denial by the Persian.

The Shaykh motioned to the black who again smote the gong, and again Musa entered, salaaming.

“Musa will show you to a chamber where food and drink will be brought you,” he said. “You are not a prisoner, of course. No guard will be placed over you. But I must ask you not to leave your chamber until I send for you. My men are suspicious of *Feringhi*, and until you are formally initiated into the society —”

There was no need to finish the sentence.

IV
Whispering Swords

The impassive Musa conducted Gordon through the bronze doors, past the files of glittering guardsmen, and along a narrow, winding corridor which branched off from the broad hallway. Some distance from the audience chamber he led Gordon into a chamber with a domed ceiling of ivory and sandal-wood and one heavy, brass-bound mahogany door. There were no windows. Air and light circulated through concealed apertures in the dome. The walls were hung with rich tapestries, the floor hidden by cushion-strewn rugs.

Musa bowed himself out without a word, shutting the door behind him, and Gordon seated himself on a velvet divan. This was the most bizarre situation he had ever found himself in, during the course of a life packed with wild adventures and bloody episodes. He felt out of place in his boots and dusty khakis, in this mysterious city that turned the clock of Time back nearly a thousand years. There was a curious sensation of having strayed out of his own age into a lost and forgotten Past.

He shook himself impatiently. This affair was no ordinary revival of an ancient mystic cult. The Shaykh ez Zurim might rule supreme in Shalizahr where sleeping ages woke in immemorial life, but Gordon sensed something behind this — a dim gigantic shadow looming behind these veils of mystery and intrigue.

What was the prize for which the great nations of the world sparred behind locked doors? India! The golden key to Asia.

Something more than the mad whim of a Persian dreamer lay behind this fantastic plot. He questioned Othman's assertion that he had rebuilt the city out of his own private fortune. He doubted if any Persian fortune would have proved adequate for the obviously stupendous expenditure. The rebuilding of Shalizahr indicated powerful backing, with unlimited resources.

Then Gordon forgot all other angles of the adventure in concern over the fate of Lal Singh. Impassive in contemplating his own peril,

and the destinies of nations, he rose and paced the floor like a caged tiger as he brooded over the mystery of the Sikh's disappearance. Othman's denial of any knowledge of the prisoner had a sinister suggestion.

Gordon seated himself as he heard sandalled feet pad in the corridor and immediately the door opened and Musa entered, followed by a huge negro bearing viands in gold dishes, and golden jug of wine. Musa closed the door quickly, but not before Gordon had a glimpse of a helmet spike protruding from the tapestries which obviously masked an alcove across the corridor. So Othman had lied when he said no guard would be placed to watch him.

Gordon considered himself absolved of any implied agreement to remain in the chamber.

"Wine of Shiraz, *sahib*, and food," Musa indicated unnecessarily. "Presently a girl beautiful as a *houri* shall be sent to entertain the *sahib."*

Gordon started to decline, when he realized that the girl would be sent anyhow, to spy on him, so he merely nodded.

Musa motioned the slave to set down the food, and he himself tasted each dish and sipped liberally of the wine, before bowing himself out of the room, herding the negro before him. But Gordon, suspicious as a hungry wolf in a trap, emptied the jug behind the divan and ate the food only after his investigations, armed by his years of experience in Oriental intrigues, convinced him that the dishes had not been tampered with.

He had scarcely completed the meal when the door opened again, just long enough to admit a slim, supple figure: a girl clad in gold breast-plates, jewel-crusted girdle, and filmy silk trousers. She might have stepped out of the *harim* of Haroun ar Raschid. But Gordon started to his feet with an exclamation, for he recognized her even before she lifted her filmy *yasmaq*.

"Azizun! What are you doing here?"

Her dark eyes were dilated with fear and excitement, her words tumbled over one another and her fingers fluttered childishly at his

hands.

“They stole me, *sahib*, the Hidden Ones, one night as I walked in my father’s garden in Delhi. By secret, devious ways they brought me to this city of devils, to be a slave with the other girls they steal out of India. Aye, they ply their slave trade under the very noses of the British, who suspect nothing.”

Gordon said nothing, but the red glint in his black eyes was eloquent. He had discovered another reason for destroying this den of snakes. The girl hurried on, stammering in her haste.

“I have dwelt here for a month! I have almost died of shame! I have been whipped! I have seen other girls die of torture. Oh, what shame for my father, that his daughter should be made a slave of pagans and devil-worshippers!

“My heart almost burst when I saw you brought in among Muhammad ibn Ahmed’s swordsmen. I was watching from a tapestried doorway. While I racked my brain for a way to get word with you, the Master of the Girls came to send a girl to the *sahib* to learn, if possible, whether he were a spy or a true man, and if he possessed any hidden weapon. I prevailed upon the Master of the Girls to send me. I told him I was your enemy, that you slew my brother.”

She meditated for a moment over the enormity of the lie; her brother was one of Gordon’s best friends.

“Azizun, do you know anything of Lal Singh, the Sikh?”

“Yes, *sahib!* They brought him here captive to make *a fedaui* of him, for no Sikh has yet joined the cult. But Lal Singh is a very powerful man, as the *sahib* knows, and after they reached the city and delivered him into the hands of the Arab guards, he broke free and with his bare hands slew the brother of Muhammad ibn Ahmed. Muhammad demanded his head, and he is too powerful even for Othman to refuse in this matter.”

“So that’s why the Shaykh lied about Lal Singh,” muttered Gordon.

“Yes, *sahib*. Lal Singh lies in a dungeon below the palace, and tomorrow he is to be given to the Arab for torture and execution.”

Gordon’s face darkened and became sinister.

“Lead me tonight to Muhammad’s sleeping quarters,” he requested, his narrowing eyes betraying his deadly intention.

“Nay, he sleeps among his warriors, all proven swordsmen of the desert, too many even for thee, Prince of Swords! I will lead you to Lal Singh!”

“What of the guard hidden in the corridor?”

“He will not see us go. And he will not open the door or allow any one else to enter until he has seen me depart.”

She drew aside the tapestry on the wall opposite the door and pressed on an arabesqued design. A panel swung inward, revealing a narrow stair that wound down into lightless depths.

“The masters think their slaves do not know their secrets,” she muttered. “Come.” Producing and lighting a tiny candle, she held it aloft as she led the way onto the stair, closing the panel after them. They descended until Gordon estimated that they were well beneath the palace, and then struck a narrow, level tunnel which ran away from the foot of the stair.

“A Rajput who planned to run away from Shalizahr showed me this secret way,” she said. “I planned to escape with him. We hid food and weapons here. He was caught and tortured, but died without betraying me. Here is the sword he hid.” She paused and fumbled in a niche, drawing out a blade which she gave to Gordon.

A few moments later they reached a heavy, iron-bound door and Azizun, gesturing for caution, drew Gordon to it and showed him a tiny aperture to peer through. He looked into a corridor flanked by rows of cells with barred doors. Archaic bronze lamps hung at intervals cast a mellow glow. Some fifty feet away the corridor made an abrupt turn.

Before one of the nearer cell doors stood a resplendent Arab in glittering corselet and plumed helmet, scimitar in hand.

Azizun's fingers tightened on Gordon's arm.

"Lal Singh is in that cell," she whispered. "Do not shoot the Arab. Slay him in silence. He has no gun and he is arrogant of his swordsmanship. The ring of steel will not be heard above."

Gordon tried the balance of the blade she had given him — a long Indian steel, light but well-nigh unbreakable, and about the same length as the Arab's scimitar.

Gordon pushed open the secret door, and as he stepped into the corridor he saw the face of Lal Singh staring through the bars behind the Arab. The hinges of the hidden door creaked, and the Arab whirled catlike, snarled and glared wildly, and then came to the attack with the instant decisiveness of a panther.

Gordon met him half-way, and the wild-eyed Sikh gripping the bars until his knuckles were bloodless, and the Indian girl crouching in the open doorway witnessed a play of swords that would have burned the blood of kings.

The only sounds were the quick, soft, sure shuffle and thud of feet, the slither and rasp of steel on steel, the breathing of the fighters. The long, light blades flickered lethally in the illusive light. They were like living things, like parts of the men who wielded them, welded not only to hand but to brain as well. To the girl it was bewildering and incomprehensible. But Lal Singh appreciated to the fullest the superlative skill which scintillated there in lightning intricasies, and he alternately chilled and burned with the bright splendor of the fray.

Even before the Arab, he knew when the hair-line balance shifted, sensed the inevitable outcome an instant before the Arab's lip drew back from his teeth in ferocious recognition of defeat and desperate resolve to take his enemy into death with him. But the end came even before Lal Singh realized its imminence. A louder ring of blades, a flash of steel that baffled the eye — Gordon's flickering blade seemed lightly to caress his enemy's neck in passing — and then the Arab was stretched on the floor, his head all but severed from his body. He had died without a cry.

Gordon stood over him for an instant, the sword in his hand stained with a thread of crimson. His shirt had been torn open and his muscular breast rose and fell easily. Only a film of perspiration glistening there and on his brow betrayed the strain of his recent exertions.

He stooped and tore a bunch of keys from the dead man's girdle, and the grate of steel in the lock seemed to awaken Lal Singh from a trance.

"Sahib! You are mad to come here! But what a fight! What a fight!"

Gordon pulled open the door, and the Sikh stepped forth, light and supple as a great panther, and picked up the Arab's sword. At the feel of the hilt he sighed with deep satisfaction. "What now, *sahib?"*

"We won't have a chance if we make a break before dark," snapped Gordon. "Azizun, how soon will another guard come to relieve the man I killed?"

"They change the guard every four hours. His watch had just begun."

"Good!" He glanced at his watch and was surprized to note the hour. He had been in Shalizahr much longer than he had realized. "Within four hours it will be sun-down. As soon as it's dark we'll make a break to get away. Until we're ready Lal Singh will hide on the secret stair."

"But when the guard comes to relieve this one," said the Sikh, "it will be known that I have escaped from my cell. You should have left me here until you were ready to go, *sahib."*

"I didn't dare risk it. I might not have been able to get you out when the time came. We have four hours lee-way. When they find you're gone, maybe the confusion will help us. We'll dress this body in your clothes and lay it in the cell, with the face turned away from the door. When the other guard comes, maybe he'll think it's you, asleep or dead, and start looking for the original guard instead of

you. The longer it is before they find you've escaped, the more time we'll have."

"Nay!" exclaimed the Sikh suddenly. "I forgot the other prisoners — in a cell beyond the turn in the corridor. They have heard the sound of the fighting, and our voices. They will betray us to the guard when he comes. I saw the Arabs hustling them along the passage a few hours ago — six villainous Kurds."

"Kurds?" Gordon looked up with quickened interest. With a few swift strides he rounded the turn in the corridor and halted, staring at a certain cell. Bearded faces crowded the grille of that cell. Lean hands gripped the bars. Poisonous hate burned in the eyes that mutely beat against him.

"You were faithful *fedauis,"* he said. "Why are you locked in a cell?"

Yusuf ibn Suleiman spat toward him.

"Melikani dog, thou! The Shaykh said we were either knaves or fools to be surprized on the Stair as you surprized us. So at dawn we die under the daggers of Muhammad ibn Ahmed's slayers, Allah curse him and you!"

"Yet it must be just, if it be the will of thy master, the Shaykh ez Zurim," he reminded them.

"May the dogs gnaw the bones of the Shaykh ez Zurim!" they replied with whole-hearted venom, and Gordon decided these men must be new recruits to the cult, lacking the age-old tradition that made most of the Hidden Ones servile slaves to the head of the order.

He weighed in his hand the keys he had taken from the dead guard, and the Kurds looked at them as men in Hell look at an open door.

"Yusuf ibn Suleiman," he said abruptly, "your hands are stained with many crimes, but not the violation of a sworn oath. The Shaykh has betrayed you — cast you from his service. You owe him no allegiance."

Yusuf's eyes were those of a wolf.

"If I could send him to Jehannum ahead of me," he muttered, "I would die happy."

All stared tensely at Gordon, sensing a purpose behind his words.

"Will you swear, each man by the honor of his clan, to serve me until vengeance is accomplished, or death releases you from the vow?" he asked, placing the keys behind him so as not to seem to be flaunting them too flagrantly before helpless men. "Othman will give you nothing but the death of a dog. I offer you revenge and a chance to die honorably."

Yusuf's eyes blazed in response to a wild surge of hope, and his sinewy hands quivered as they grasped the bars.

"Trust us!" was all he said, but it spoke volumes.

"Aye, we swear!" clamored the men behind him. "Hearken, El Borak, we swear!"

He was already turning the key in the lock; wild, cruel, treacherous according to western standards, they had their code of honor, those fierce mountaineers, and it was not so far different from the code of his own Highlander ancestors but that he could understand it.

Tumbling out of the cell they lifted their hands toward him, palms outward.

"*Ya khawand! We* await orders!"

Motioning them to follow him, he strode back down the corridor to where the dead Arab lay.

"Drag the body into that cell and you, Yusuf ibn Suleiman, put on his garments."

The celerity with which they obeyed him modified the suspicion in Lal Singh's dark eyes, and the Sikh relaxed his grip on his scimitar. In a very few moments Yusuf ibn Suleiman emerged in the plumed helmet, corselet, and silken garments of the Arab, and his features were sufficiently Semitic to deceive anyone who was expecting to encounter an Arab in that garb.

“Give him the Arab’s scimitar, Lal Singh,” commanded Gordon, and the Sikh obeyed readily.

“You will play the part of a guard patrolling this corridor,” said Gordon. “These others will hide behind yonder secret door. In four hours time one will come to relieve you. He will think you are the man whose garments you wear, and you must kill or capture him before he recognizes you. With Lal Singh and your companions to aid you, it should be easy.

“That will give us four more hours of time in which to plan and effect our escape from Shalizahr. I’ve made no definite plan yet; that will depend on circumstances. Yusuf ibn Suleiman will patrol the corridors in case someone comes before the guard is due to be changed. Lal Singh and the other Kurds will hide in the tunnel. As soon as it is dark, if I’m still alive and at liberty, I’ll come to you and we’ll make the break, somehow. If anything happens to me the girl Azizun will get the word to you, and you must take her and try to fight your way clear.

“In case you men make it and I don’t, try to get back along the trail and meet the Ghilzai as they come. I sent Yar Ali Khan back after them. He should return with them to the canyon below the plateau some time tomorrow morning.”

They listened in silence, nodding, and Gordon gave his pistol and electric torch to Lal Singh, and the Indian saber to one of the Kurds. Then Azizun relighted her candle, and Gordon pulled open the secret door which, when closed, presented the illusion of being part of the blank stone wall, and showed his followers the tunnel behind it.

“Here you must hide, ready to aid Yusuf ibn Suleiman when the guard comes. If neither I nor Azizun comes to you within seven hours, go up the stairs, open the panel-door and escape if you can.”

“We hearken and obey, *sahib,”* said Lal Singh. “It is my shame that I was taken unawares, but the Yezidees stole out of the ravine like cats, and struck me down with a stone thrown from a sling before I was aware of them. When I regained my senses I was bound

and gagged. In the same way they smote down Ahmed Shah, but him they slew, because the Hidden Ones have naught to do with the hill-folk fearing such men would talk to their kind and so betray the secret of Shalizahr. The Yezidees are like cats in the dark. Nevertheless it is a great shame upon me."

And so saying he seated himself cross-legged on the tunnel floor, where the Kurds had already deposited themselves, and settled himself tranquilly for his long vigil. Gordon followed Azizun down the tunnel and up the stair, with his whole chance of success and life itself depending on the word of a savage. There was nothing to keep Yusuf ibn Suleiman from seeking to buy his life from Othman by betraying the American — nothing but the primitive honor of a man who knew he was trusted by another man of honor.

Back in the ivory-domed chamber, Azizun carefully hung the tapestry over the fake panel, and Gordon said: "You'd better go now. If you stay too long, they may get suspicious. Contrive to return to me here as soon as it's dark. I've got an idea that I'm to remain in this chamber until this fellow Bagheela returns. When you come back, tell the guard outside that the Shaykh sent you. If the Shaykh questions you concerning me, tell him I'm a bloody-handed outlaw, eager to join the Hidden Ones — and that I have no hidden weapons on me."

"Yes, *sahib*! I will return after dark." The girl was trembling with fear and excitement, but she controlled herself admirably. There was pity in Gordon's black eyes as he watched her slender figure, carried bravely, pass through the door.

Then the hard-limbed American stretched himself on the couch. Four hours at least must pass before he could make any kind of a move. Long ago he had learned to snatch food and sleep when he could. He was playing a game with Life and Death for stakes. His masquerade hung by a hair. He had as yet no plan for escaping from the city or descending the cliffs afterward. He was gambling that he would be able to find or make a way when the time was ripe. And in the meantime he slept as tranquilly and soundly as if he lay in the house of a friend, in his native country.

V
The Mask Falls

Like most men who live by the skin of their teeth, Gordon's slumber though sound, was light. He awoke the instant a hand touched the door, and he was on his feet, fully alert, when Musa entered, with the inevitable salaam. He knew he had not slept four hours.

"The Shaykh ez Zurim desires your presence, *sahib*. The lord Bagheela has returned, ahead of time."

So the mysterious Panther had returned sooner than the Shaykh had expected. Gordon felt a premonitory tightening of his nerves as he followed the Persian out of the chamber. A backward glance showed a man emerge from the tapestry where he had glimpsed the helmet, and fall in behind them.

Musa did not lead him back to the chamber where the Shaykh had first received him. He was conducted through a winding corridor to a gilded door before which stood an Arab swordsman. This man opened the door, and Musa hurried Gordon across the threshold. The door closed behind them, and Gordon halted suddenly.

He stood in a broad room without windows, but with several doors. Across the chamber the Shaykh lounged on a divan with his black slaves behind him, and clustered about him were a dozen armed men of various races, including one Orakzai, the first Pathan Gordon had seen in Shalizahr — a hairy, ragged, scarred villain whom Gordon knew as Khuruk Khan, a thief and murderer.

But the American spared these men only the briefest glance. His eyes were glued on the man who dominated the scene. This man stood between him and the Shaykh's divan, with the wide-legged stance of a horseman — handsome in a dark, saturnine way. He was taller than Gordon and more wiry in build, his leanness being emphasized by his close-fitting breeches and riding boots. One hand caressed the butt of the heavy automatic which hung at his thigh, the other stroked his thin black mustache. And Gordon knew the

game was up. For this was Ivan Konstantine, a Cossack, who knew El Borak too well to be deceived as the Shaykh had been.

“This is the man,” said Othman. “He desires to join us.”

The man they called Bagheela the Panther smiled thinly.

“He has been playing a role. El Borak would never turn renegade. He is here as a spy for the English.”

The eyes fixed on the American grew suddenly murderous. No more than Bagheela’s word was necessary to convince his followers. They did not understand why the American laughed suddenly. Konstantine did not understand. He knew Gordon well enough to know El Borak was a foe, not a friend of the Hidden Ones, but he did not know him well enough to understand that laugh, or the dark flame that rose in the black eyes.

Gordon’s laughter was not of self-mockery, or of that cynicism which derides its own defeat. It welled from the depths of his elemental soul in the knowledge that all masks were fallen, subtlety and intrigue were done with, and only fighting remained — fighting in which he exulted blindly, unreasoningly, whatever the odds, as his berserk ancestors exulted. But for the moment he held himself hard in check, and his enemies did not recognize the warning that burned in his black eyes.

The Shaykh made a gesture of repudiation.

“In these matters I defer to your judgment, Bagheela. You know the man. I do not. Do what you will. He is unarmed.”

At the assurance of the helplessness of their prey, wolfish cruelty sharpened the tense faces, and Khuruk Khan half drew a three-foot Khyber knife from its embroidered scabbard. There was plenty of edged steel in evidence, but the Cossack’s gun was the only one in sight.

“That will make it easier,” laughed Konstantine, then slipped into Russian which the Persian obviously did not understand. “Gordon, you were mad to come here. You should have known you’d meet

someone who knew you as you are — not as these fools think you are."

"You were the joker in the deck," admitted Gordon. "I didn't know the natives called you Bagheela. But I knew some European power must be behind this masquerade. Somebody's dreaming of an Asiatic empire. So they sent you to combine forces with a fanatic, help him build a city, and make a tool of him. They supplied money and European wits. What do they hope to do — supplant each Eastern ruler now friendly to England with a puppet trained to dance on their string?"

"In part," admitted Konstantine. "This is but one strand in a far-flung web of imperial plan. I won't bother to remind you that you might have had a part in the coming empire, if you chose. I can not understand your friendship for the British who rule India. You are an American."

Gordon smiled bleakly.

"I care nothing for England or English interests. But India is better off under British rule that it would be under men who employ such tools as yourself. By the way, who are your employers now? The agents of the Czar — or somebody else?"

"That will make little difference to you shortly!" Konstantine showed his white teeth in a light laugh. Othman and his men were exhibiting uneasiness, irked at being unable to follow the conversation. The Cossack shifted to Arabic. "Your finish will be interesting to watch. Men say you are stoical as the red Indians of your country. I am curious to test that reputation. Bind him, men —"

His gesture as he reached for the automatic at his hip was leisurely. He knew Gordon was dangerous, but he had never seen the black-haired Westerner in action; he could not realize the savage quickness that had won El Borak his name. Before the Cossack could draw his pistol Gordon sprang and struck as a panther strikes. The impact of his fist was like that of a trip-hammer and Konstantine

went down, blood spurting from his jaw, the pistol slipping from its holster.

Before Gordon could snatch the weapon Khuruk Khan was upon him. Only the Pathan realized Gordon's deadly quickness, and even he had not been swift enough to save the Cossack. But he kept Gordon from securing the pistol, for El Borak had to whirl and grapple as the three-foot Khyber knife rose above him. Gordon caught the knife-wrist as it fell, checking the stroke in mid-air, the iron sinews springing out on his own wrist with the effort. His right hand ripped a curved dagger from the Pathan's girdle and sank it to the hilt under his ribs almost with the same motion. Khuruk Khan groaned and sank down dying, and Gordon wrenched away the long knife as he crumpled.

All this had happened in a stunning explosion of speed. Konstantine was down and Khuruk Khan was dying before the others could get into action, and when they did they were met by a yard of razor-edged steel in the hand of the most terrible knife-fighter North of the Khyber.

Gordon did not put his back to the wall; he sprang into the thick of his foes, wielding his dripping knife murderously. They swirled about him; he was the center of a whirlwind of blades that flickered and lunged and swiped, yet somehow missed their mark again and again as he shifted his position so swiftly that he baffled both eye and hand. Their numbers hindered them; they cut thin air or gashed one another, confused by his speed and demoralized by his wolfish ferocity.

At such close quarters the long knife was more deadly than saber or tulwar, and Gordon was master of its every use, whether the terrible downward swing that splits a skull, or the savage upward rip that spills out a man's entrails. It was butcher's work, but El Borak never made a false motion, was never for an instant in doubt or confused. Like a typhoon he waded through that milling jam of straining bodies and flailing blades, and he left a red wake behind him.

The sense of time is lost in the madness of battle. However long it seemed to the combatants, it was only a matter of moments until the melee burst asunder as the survivors gave back, stunned by the havoc wrought among them. And as the press gave way Gordon cleared a path with a devastating swing of his knife and bounded toward the nearest door — the one on the left of that opening into the hallway.

"Stop him!" screamed the Shaykh, from his place of safety across the room, flanked by his stolid Sudanese. In his fury he ran across the chamber, shrieking maledictions at his groping, floundering, bemused warriors.

They seemed paralyzed by the rapid movements of the American. Gordon reached the door and jerked at it, and his heart fell into his boots. It was bolted on the other side. Clusters of armed men stood between him and the other doors, and now they converged toward him as Othman yelled with gratification and lashed them on. Gordon wheeled, his back to the wall at last, facing death in the onrushing hedge of bristling steel backed by wild faces, but aware of no emotion except a ferocious intent to take a bloody toll among his slayers.

The door opened behind him and he whipped around in a flash and struck at the arm that extended a big blue pistol — checked the blow just in time because he recognized the gun and the hand that held it — and then the blue muzzle spat flame and smoke and thunder and a hail of lead crashed into the oncoming horde.

At that range it was slaughter. The heavy slugs ripped through tense bodies to deal death to the men behind them. Through a swirling fog of smoke Gordon saw men staggering and falling, heard one high-pitched shriek ring above the clamor, and saw a rose-colored turban tossed convulsively as it sank — a roar of dismay drowned the death-cries as Gordon sprang through the open door and slammed it.

"You've killed Othman!" he roared.

Lal Singh laughed in the fierce exurberance of the moment, and shot home the bolt. Azizun was clinging to Gordon's arm, half-mad with terror, and the Kurds were clustered about him — Yusuf ibn Suleiman in the plumed helmet, scimitar in hand, and the other five, armed with swords and daggers.

"The girl came to us where we waited in the tunnel, and cried out that they meant to slay you, *sahib*!*"* shouted Lal Singh, white teeth flashing in his black beard. "We came swiftly, snatching blades from weapon-racks as we ran! Now we await your orders!"

In the other chamber howls of fear and dismay that greeted the fall of Othman were turning into screams of blood-thirsty frenzy. Not lightly may a man slay a Shaykh ez Zurim, head of a cult that was old when England was a savage wilderness. The bolted door began to tremble under the impacts of battering hilts and frantic bodies. Ivan Konstantine's voice was lifted like the slash of a saber above the clamor.

"Out into the corridor, you dogs! Surround that chamber!"

"Out of here, quick!" snapped Gordon, and led his followers at a run across the chamber to the opposite door. He did not know where it led, but there no time to pick and choose. They had to escape the trap before it closed. They burst into a corridor that led off from the larger hall at right angles — and collided with a pack of Arab swordsmen hurrying in the direction of the noise. One was Muhammad ibn Ahmed.

"Ya kalb!" yelped Yusuf ibn Suleiman and glutted his resentment in a swipe that shattered the captain's helmet and stretched him dead on the floor. An instant of raking steel and snarling, straining effort — an Arab blade licking like a jet of blue lightning through a Kurdish heart — blades biting and men falling — and then Gordon and his people were fleeing down the corridor, leaving a huddled welter of writhing or motionless figures behind them. Only five Kurds now, and one of them was bleeding from a gashed shoulder.

Into the corridor behind them burst a throng of wild figures that came pelting after them, a frantic vision of blazing eyes, gaping

mouths and waving blades. Guns banged and bullets spatted venomously on the wall. Ahead of the fugitives a stair led upward. Beyond the stair more men were rushing to head them off, as swordsmen from all over the palace came in answer to the unwonted din.

"Up the stair!" Gordon had his arm about Azizun's waist, sweeping her along with her toes scarcely touching the floor, almost crushing her with the unconscious strength of his grasp. They swarmed up the stair as the mob came down the passage in full cry. They had almost reached the head when the crack of a Luger split the din and one of the Kurds groaned, stumbled and fell backward headlong down the steps like a bundle of old clothes. The limp body crashed against the legs of the men just leaping on to the lower steps, and they went down in a blaspheming heap.

Ivan Konstantine was running down the corridor, firing as he came. Lal Singh whirled on the top step and snapped the empty pistol at him. Ivan instinctively dodged, leaping behind another man. Before he could fire again his targets had gained the upper landing and were out of sight and range for the moment.

They emerged into a broad hallway, and veiled women shrieked and scattered. But from the doorways came more menacing figures — tall blacks with broad scimitars. From all sides except one they converged on the invaders. These fled the only way open to them — down the hall, toward a bronze door at the end. Gordon had no idea what it concealed, but that did not matter; there was no other place to go. The door stood partly open.

Another realized their plight and their intention. A figure ran out of a side-door just ahead of them and darted toward the bronze portal, with a huge key in his hand.

"The Master of the Girls!" yelled Yusuf furiously. "He will lock the door in our faces, for us to be butchered —"

Behind them a dozen Sudani swordsmen were coming in long bounds, and the first of the horde from below were swarming into the hall from the stair. The Master of the Girls had accurately

grasped the situation, and acted boldly. If he could get into the chamber ahead of them, and lock them out — but he did not reckon with the long legs of Lal Singh which hurled the Sikh along at a speed not even the burdened Gordon could approximate. The Persian reached the door — then wheeled snarling and lifting a knife. But before he could strike, the heavy pistol, swinging like a battle-axe in Lal Singh's hand, crushed his skull and hurled him dead to the floor, and over his twitching body the panting, sweat-soaked fugitives stumbled across the threshold.

VI
A Broken Trap

Not until the bronze door had been locked and bolted did Gordon look about, shaking the sweat from his eyes. And then he realized they were in a trap. They were in an enclosed balcony which hung above the pillared portico. Through a wide casement he could see the courtyard with its fountain and fluttering pigeons, the wall with its bronze-barred gate open, and beyond that the square and the broad, shaded street of Shalizahr. Men were running down this street, weapons in their hands. Men were swarming through the open gate. The courtyard was a milling mass of furious humanity. The babel of voices was dominated by a many-throated shout that rose again and again, howling that the Shaykh was slain! the Shaykh was slain!

Yusuf ibn Suleiman came to the window and stood beside Gordon. He spat, wiping blood from his beard. He had thrown away the plumed helmet.

"What man can avert his Fate?" he inquired without emotion. "We be seven men and a chit of a girl. Seven swords against five hundred."

"Is there any way out of here?" asked Gordon.

The Kurd pointed toward the door, now re-echoing with the assault of steel-shod rifle butts. "Through that door and the swords

outside." He nodded toward the window. "Or down those columns and through that pack of wolves in the courtyard. Nay, El Borak, we die here."

Gordon nodded in silent agreement. The sun was setting. It would be at least an hour before Yar Ali Khan could possibly reach Khor. If he and the Ghilzai started back at once they could not reach Shalizahr before dawn. And Gordon knew that as far as he and his companions were concerned the game would be played out long before midnight.

"Look!" Yusuf laughed and pointed. "We Kurds are not the only careless fools! Here come the men who at sunset relieve the guard watching the Stair!"

Far down the street, where it emerged into the plain, a group of men, small in the distance, had turned about and were hastening back toward the city. The setting sun struck glints from their rifles. Some distance behind them hastened another group.

"The men they were to have relieved!" Yusuf laughed sardonically. "They wish to be in at the slaughter! They fear they are missing sport! Fools, to leave the Stair unguarded! Yet what foe need they fear, with El Borak hemmed in the palace like a trapped wolf?"

He sprang back as a volley rattled in the courtyard below. The bullets ripped through the sandal-wood lattice work about the window. The mob had discovered the hiding place of their prey.

"They will be climbing up on ladders next!"

"Doubtless. They'll have to climb to the window, or break down the door to get to us," answered Gordon. "That door looks pretty solid."

"They will break it with a ram," said Yusuf ibn Suleiman.

Gordon shrugged his shoulders impatiently. There was no fatalism in his nature. He meant to fight to the last, bitter end. But he knew that the Kurds would fight, too, while they could stand or see, simply because they trusted him and were proud of his leadership.

An insistent knock banged the door, and Konstantine called: “Gordon, you’re trapped! You’re surrounded by five hundred fighting men, crazy mad because you killed their Shaykh! I’m the supreme power in Shalizahr right now. I know you’ve got no ammunition. I’ve sent for a timber to batter down this door, and then we’ll simply swamp you with numbers. Why don’t you come out and surrender? I’ll promise you a quick death instead of slow torture.”

“And I promise you a knife in your guts,” snarled Gordon. “Come and get us if you can!”

Konstantine swore, then laughed. They heard muttering voices, the quick pad of feet outside the door, the jangle of weapons. Suddenly there came a gust of firing, a spattering of bullets against the door, and then Ivan’s angry voice cursing his followers for wasting ammunition.

Down in the courtyard the crowd milled and raved, dark arms upflung brandishing clenched fists or weapons, dark faces upturned to howl imprecations. They filled the small courtyard, and men massed thickly in the square outside the gate. These fired sporadically at the balcony and some of their bullets smashed into windows above it, bringing feminine screams. A voice yelling angrily from the portico below put a stop to the shooting.

Gordon glanced at his men. Their eyes burned wolfishly and they grinned without mirth, thumbing their red-stained blades. They knew they were going to die, but they were not afraid. He did not insult them by reminding them that they might have escaped while he was fighting with the Shaykh’s men in the chamber where he confronted Konstantine. He did ask: “How did you get there so quick? The fight had been going on only a few moments when you were at the door.”

Azizun, crouched shivering on a divan, answered him: “I saw Musa leading you to the chamber where Bagheela waited. I had never seen him, but I heard a slave speak his *Feringhi* name — Ivan Konstantine. I knew him, then, and knew that he knew you and

would expose you as an imposter. So I ran to the tunnel and told the men."

Lal Singh, looking down into the courtyard, spoke casually: "They rear ladders against the pillars."

Simultaneously the door began to jerk and quiver as a heavy timber, swung between brawny arms, smashed against it.

"Drag the heaviest divan across the door to brace it," directed Gordon. "It's a strong door. It won't be easy to break it with a wooden ram."

He bound up the wounded Kurd's shoulder with strips torn from his shirt, and told him to watch the door; with the others Gordon took his stand at the window.

The sun had set and twilight was darkening into blue dusk. Men were scrambling up the ladders with knives in their teeth. The ladders were too short. Men climbed on the shoulders of their comrades, balancing precariously, while they thrust up at the men in the window and tried to get a hold on the ledge. The Sikh prodded them with his long saber and they lost their footing and tumbled, three or four together, down upon the heads of the mob. The others fell back sullenly, and the defenders saw them pull the ladders down and begin the job of fastening them together, end to end.

No more shots were fired. With the palace full of their people, the men in the courtyard dared not risk bullets. Gordon was content that his last great fight should be fought out with naked steel.

The men in the hall finally decided that the timber they were using for a ram was too light to have any effect on the thick bronze portal and the massive lock and hinges. Gordon heard Konstantine ordering someone to go search for a heavier ram. There came a lull in the fighting that was like a moment of quiet in the middle of a hurricane. Down in the courtyard the roar of the mob had sunk to a sullen muttering, punctuated by the banging of hammers. The warriors in the balcony took advantage of the interlude to catch their breath and bind up wounds.

Azizun crept to Gordon's side, her eyes dilated with fear. Little of comfort he could offer her from his great store of pity for her. He had cast the dice and lost, for himself, for them all. There was nothing he could do for her now, except to interpose his body between her's and their enemies in the last charge, and save a merciful sword-stroke for her in the end. Sensing the desperation of their position she lay like a child face down on the divan beside him, clasping his hands and pressing her cheeks against them. Gordon sat quietly, awaiting the last grapple with the patience of the wild in which he had spent so much of his life, and though his expression was composed, his eyes burned like the reflection of flame on black water.

Dusk deepened quickly into darkness. Below in the courtyard torches tossed, redly limning fierce faces, streaming crimson on blades that would be stained with a redder smear before midnight. The hammers had ceased. The voice of the mob was a sustained, wordless roar, deep with menace and edged with hate. Azizun thrust her fingers in her ears to shut it out.

Feet pounded down the hall, fierce voices shouted, and the door staggered under an impact that made the walls vibrate, and brought every man in the balcony to his feet, tense with the realization that the death-grip was imminent. The door would not stand long under such blows.

The end of a ladder appeared at the window, swayed erratically and crashed against the ledge. A Kurd caught at it, but Lal Singh checked him.

"Wait till they get on it!"

The clamor rose deafeningly, a high-pitched wolf-pack yell of exultation. In the glare of the wildly tossing torches Gordon saw men detaching from the mass below and swarming up the ladder, like spray tossed up by a foaming tide. Their upturned eyes gleamed whitely in the glare.

The bronze door thundered to the assault on the other side. It was iron meeting bronze now, and the upper hinge began to give way,

the bolts to bend, the metal panels to crack. Azizun shrank and quivered as if each blow impacted on her tender body. The only light in the balcony-chamber was the dim reflection of the torches outside. In that gloom Gordon saw Lal Singh's white teeth flash a grin of farewell. The eyes of the Kurds burned weirdly in the shadows.

The giant Sikh leaned out of the window, laughing down in the contorted faces of the men below him, just out of reach of their uplunging blades. He gripped the ends of the ladder, one in each hand, pulling at one, pushing against the other. His legs were braced, the muscles stood out in ridges on his mighty forearms. Slowly, with all its dead weight of wood and clinging men, the ladder began to revolve in his hands. One end swung out from the wall, and the climbers screamed, dropped knives and caught at rungs. Lal Singh gasped in the agony of supreme muscular exertion, and the ladder swayed, toppled sidewise and rushed earthward with its howling cargo, to crash into the packed mob below. Lal Singh's laughter mocked the screams that welled up from the courtyard where writhing figures, penned under the fallen beams, clawed at the tiles.

With a thunderous crash a great piece broke out of the door, giving a glimpse of wild faces and dark arms swinging a long timber capped with iron. Another smashing blow and the upper half of the door gave way and broke off raggedly, leaving an aperture that was instantly filled with flashing steel and snarling visages, as the attackers dropped the ram and strove to thrust open the remnant of the door with their bare hands, or, failing that, to clamber over the lower part of the door. This, wedged by the divan, formed a jagged barrier, breast-high. And at this rampart the defenders met the attackers.

Steel glinted back and forth in swift flickerings over the jagged metal edge. Dark hands, gripping the broken door, fell from wrists under the bite of swift steel. Men howled like mad dogs. A Kurd, leaning out too far to thrust, fouled his steel and had his skull split

before he could twist it clear. Every man in the balcony-chamber was streaming blood.

“Back, you fools!” yelled Ivan, standing behind the warriors. “Take the ram and break away the lower half of the door!” He snapped his empty pistol at the men beyond the door, then threw it away with a curse. The Cossack’s fury seemed tinged with madness. Too long had this handful of men kept his slayers at bay.

They fell back, black Sudanese, lean Arabs, and squat Mongols, dragging their dead from before the door, and lifted the great ram again. Lal Singh and the Kurds shook the sweat and blood out of their eyes and took a fresh grip on their blood-slippery swords. Gordon remembered the window, and stepped to the ledge. Another ladder had been propped against the wall, and this time many men gripped its base firmly. A score were swarming up it. Gordon gripped the long knife, waiting for them to come within reach. He drew a long breath and lifted his head to catch, for the last time, the breath of night-wind that brought him the tang of snow-freshened peaks. And with his head lifted he stood motionless, staring out over the crowd.

The torches in the courtyard and the square accentuated the darkness beyond, but he made out a dark mass moving down the street. It was men, many men, marching quietly in compact formation. Who could it be? Reinforcements, of course; more of the Hidden Ones returning from some raid. But why did they come so quietly?

The men on the ladder were only a few rungs away, climbing in grim silence, while the crowd below yelled and hooted. All eyes in that mob were turned upward toward the balcony window. No one saw the men who came on so silently and with such grim intent. Only a few yards separated them now from the backs of the crowd in the square — and suddenly, stunningly, a crash of musketry ripped the night apart. Fire fringed that black mass. A storm of lead tore through the crowd outside the gate.

Men went down in rows and files. Every man in the courtyard jerked around, struck dumb. The battering at the door ceased suddenly. But hell burst loose in the square. Fired at point-blank range that volley had torn lanes through the close-packed throng, and the survivors, wheeling in stupefied amazement, got a wild glimpse of fierce, stranger faces glaring over muzzles that almost touched them. Even as they turned those muzzles blazed death in their faces, and screaming like damned souls, those who still lived gave way and surged blindly into the gate, sweeping all before them. Men went down, trampled in the rush, and the ladder rocked, toppled and crashed in that dark tide of frantic humanity. The crowd in the court, ignorant of what was happening, was swept along by the stampede, and lashed into an equal panic. All swept toward the portico, screaming and clawing in a heaving mass. Behind them came of men in an irresistible wave, sending up a war-cry to the stars that brought the hot blood surging to Gordon's brain.

"The Ghilzai!" he roared, stunned by the miracle.

They came into the courtyard headlong, rifles blazing at point-blank range, and their volleys mowed men down like ripe grain. In an instant the courtyard was littered with writhing shapes. Men swarming over the wall toppled down with lead in their backs, and the invaders fell on the howling, fear-mad crowd jammed in the portico. They plunged knives into straining backs, flailed at the tossing heads with steel-shod rifle butts.

The guilt of a thousand abominable crimes stained the men of Shalizahr, but retribution had struck at last, like lightning from the hills. It was less fight than massacre. The sudden, unexpected blow broke and scattered the Hidden Ones like birds before a storm. They made no attempt to rally. They fled away over the wall by the scores, jammed and fought their way into the palace in a maddened crush, and before they could close the doors, the blood-mad tribesmen were in after them. To Gordon, staring down into the courtyard where a few torches smoked and smoldered on the ground, it was if a tornado had stormed across the court, littering it

with corpses, and swept on into the palace. In the halls and chambers below raved the sounds of slaughter, yells, shots, stamp of swift feet, impact of blows, and the thud of heavy bodies taking the floor.

Out in the hall the Sudani had thrown down the ram and fled down the stair, the Arabs and Mongols pelting after them, all crazy with panic. They did not heed Konstantine's blows and curses, but swept him along with them. At the head of the stair he extricated himself, yelling and blaspheming like a madman. One glance into the hall below was enough for him. In that bedlam downstairs he recognized the end of his ambitions. And a kind of madness seized the Cossack. He turned and ran back toward the broken door, a heavy saber in his hand.

"Come out, Gordon!" he yelled frenziedly, his eyes blazing insanely. "Come out, if you call yourself a man! I'm beaten, but I'll take you to hell with me! Damn you, come out!"

The fire of fighting that burned in Gordon's veins was no less furious than Konstantine's madness. He threw off Lal Singh's restraining hand, tore aside the broken door and rushed into the hall, gripping the Khyber knife. He came like a gust of storm-wind, plunging in under the lifted sword with a berserk fury that swept away all caution. With all the impetuous of his headlong rush behind the lunge, his long knife drove to the haft in the Cossack's body, and then the heavy saber hilt, wielded with the convulsive strength of a dying man, crashed down on his head, and blackness fell over him like an ebony curtain.

Slowly, through the soft darkness that surrounded him, Gordon groped his way back to consciousness. Hearing came before sight, for before he could see anything but the blind, pulsing waves of darkness, he could hear voices, mumbling, indistinct and meaningless. Then a dim glow began, high up, like a star seen from a black pit. It grew, expanded, became the mellow light shed softly from a bronze lamp. Then he knew who he was and remembered something of what had happened. He was aware of a dull and terrible hurt in his head, and knew that it was bandaged. He began

to understand the voices, to understand the blurred, wavering visions that met his eyes.

He was lying on a couch, and dimly he saw Azizun crouching beside him. Her eyes looked unnaturally great and dark in her pale face. From time to time she placed a fresh pad of dampened cloth on his head. Other faces floated behind hers. Bearded faces. He recognized them: Yusuf ibn Suleiman; Lal Singh; Yar Ali Khan; Baber Khan.

Lal Singh was speaking and by a tremendous effort of will, Gordon made himself understand what the Sikh was saying: “I still do not understand how you arrived here when you did. El Borak said you could not reach Khor before nightfall, and that it would be dawn before you could return to Shalizar —”

“I met the Ghilzai about half-way between the Gorge of Ghosts and Khor,” answered Afridi.

“The men I sent to guide El Borak returned to Khor before dawn,” said Baber Khan. “They told me they had heard the voice of the *djinn*, and that El Borak intended plunging on into *Ghulistan*. First I beat them with an ox-goad for allowing him to go on without them. Then I mounted every able bodied man in Khor and brought them in all haste. Devils or men, had I known he intended invading this country I would never have let him leave Khor unless I accompanied him with all my swords.

“We left our horses in the Gorge of Ghosts. Yar Ali Khan led us through the secret door in the cliff-wall, and we rushed the guard in the cleft and cut his head off before he knew we were near. It was night when we reached the Stair. It was unguarded. We climbed the cliffs and came on quietly. The dogs did not see us until we loosed a volley into their backs.”

Gordon forced his lips apart and murmured: “Baber Khan!”

Instantly the bearded faces clustered close about him, dark eyes gleaming with both hope and anxiety.

“Sahib! You know us! You can speak!”

“How did the fight go?” Gordon whispered. Strange how hard it was to whisper.

“There was no fight, *sahib*. The dogs fled before us. The halls are choked with their bodies. Those who live have fled, taking the body of their accursed Shaykh with them. The Cossack lies dead in an upper hall. We hold Shalizahr. You are lying in an inner chamber. I have sent men to get horses and ride for a *hakim*. We will have a *Feringhi* doctor for you if we have to bring one from Kabul. The cult of the Hidden Ones is shattered. The few who yet live have fled into the mountains.”

“The women in the city —” Gordon muttered. “They are slaves, stolen from Persia and India —”

“We have collected them under guard in the seraglio,” said Lal Singh. “Not one has been harmed. Later we will arrange to send them back to their homes.”

“Good!” Gordon sank back, and the shadows began to close about him. “You have saved your head, Baber Khan. The Amir will pardon you for this night’s work. The three-bladed dagger is broken —”

His voice sank into silence, and Azizun cried out, throwing her arms about him.

Yar Ali Khan clutched his beard in agony.

“Allah! He is dying!”

Lal Singh, his hand on Gordon’s hard wrist, shook his head.

“Nay, he sleeps. His skull is broken, but it is not written that the blow of a hilt should slay El Borak. He will live, to fulfill the destiny the gods have given him.”

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Untitled Fragment

“Feel the edge, dog, and move not!” The hissing voice was no less menacing than the razor-edged blade that was pressed just beneath Kirby O’Donnell’s chin. The American lay still, staring up into the dim ring of bearded faces, vague as phantoms in the dull glow of a waning electric torch. He had fancied himself safe in the guarded palace of his friend Orkhan Bahadur but anything, he reflected, could happen in Shahrazar the Forbidden. Had these men who came so silently by night discovered the real identity of the man who called himself Ali el Ghazi, a Kurdish wanderer? Their next words set his mind at rest on that score.

“Rise from your couch, Ali el Ghazi,” muttered the leader of the men. “Rise slowly and place your hands behind you. This dagger has sent a Kurd to Hell before now.”

O’Donnell slowly obeyed the order, raging inwardly, but outwardly imperturbable. His keen edged scimitar and *kindhjal* lay almost within his grasp, but he knew that a move toward them would send four curved blades plunging into his heart, wielded by desperately taut nerves.

As he came to a sitting position, his wrists were gripped fiercely, and bound behind him. The edge still trembled against his throat. A single yell might bring aid, but he would never live to complete it. He thought he knew the leader of the gang — one Baber Khan, a renegade Gilzai who followed Orkhan Bahadur as a jackal follows a tiger.

“Not a word;” whispered the deadly voice. “Come with us.”

The American was hauled roughly to his feet and moved across the chamber among the close clump of his captors. A knife point bored into his ribs. The bare feet made no sound as they left the chamber and emerged into a broad hallway, flanked by thick columns. Somewhere a cresset glowed, lighting the place fitfully and

dimly. Baber Khan had extinguished his electric torch. But in the light of the cresset O'Donnell saw the black mute Orkhan Bahadur had given him as a body guard — more a royal gesture than anything else, for Orkhan did not suppose that Ali el Ghazi had enemies in Shahrazar. The black man must have been dozing when the killers crept upon him, for he had had no chance to use his wide-tipped tulwar. His white eye-balls were rolled up, glimmering whitely in the torch-light. His black throat was cut from ear to ear.

The eldritch group saw no one as they stole down the weirdly lurid hallway. They might have been ghosts of some of the many men whose blood had stained that pillared hall since the days of Timur-il-leng, and the Tatar sultans. Silence lay over the palace, the silence of death-like slumber. They came to a stair which led downward, and down this they went, into swallowing gloom. On a lower landing they halted, and O'Donnell felt himself forced to his haunches. He could see nothing, but he felt hairy silk-clad bodies pressing him close. A voice whispered so close to his ear that the hot breath burned him.

"None comes down this stair by night, Kurd; speak quickly!"

"Of what shall I speak?" demanded O'Donnell guardedly, for the knife was still at his neck. It was an eery experience, ringed by bodies and knives he could not see, with menacing voices whispering out of the gloom like disembodied spirits.

"I will refresh thy memory," muttered the voice of Baber Khan. "A week ago we rode down the valley, with the riders of the Turkomans, behind Orkhan Bahadur, to take this city of Shahrazar from Shaibar Khan and his Uzbeks. Orkhan greatly desired this city, because somewhere in it he knew there was a great treasure — the treasure gathered long ago by Muhammad Shah, king of Khuwarezm. When the Mongols of Genghis Khan hunted the *Shah-im-shah* to his death across the world, his *emirs* bore to forgotten Shahrazar his great store of gold, silver and jewels. Here it remained hidden until Shaibar Khan discovered its hiding place. Then came we, with Orkhan Bahadur, and slew all the Uzbeks and took the city and set up Orkhan Bahadur as prince of Shahrazar."

“All this is well known to me,” impatiently answered O’Donnell.

“Aye, for thou wert Shaibar Khan’s slave!”

“A lie!” exclaimed O’Donnell, starting with amazement. “The Khan was my enemy —”

“Soho!” hissed the voice venomously. “Be still, thou!” The wire-edge just touched the skin of his throat, and a tiny trickle of blood started. “In a chamber below the palace we found Shaibar Khan dead, and with him Yar Akbar the Afridi, likewise dead. But nowhere was the treasure to be found. Nor has Orkhan Bahadur found it, though he is lord of Shahrazar.

“Now it was known that certain men had the care of the treasure in their hands, to guard it and protect it with their lives. They were twelve in number, and were called the *emirs* of the Inner Chamber. Eleven of these men we found dead, and we knew them by reason of a gold emblem each wore on a gold chain about his neck — an oval of gold, with a Khuwarezm inscription — so!”

A glow dazzled O’Donnell; in it a great hairy hand snaked out of the dark and tore at the garments over his breast — wrenched out something that glimmered in the dull light. Breath hissed from between teeth in the dark about him. In the gnarled hand lay an oval of beaten gold, carved with a single cryptic character.

“You are the twelfth man!” accused Baber Khan. You were an *emir* of the Inner Chamber! It was you who hid the treasure!”

“I am no Uzbek!” snarled O’Donnell.

“Nay, but Shaibar Khan had men of many races among his ranks. You were found in the palace when we took the city, the only living fighting man in the palace. I have watched you closely, and today I spied the symbol among your garments.”

O’Donnell cursed mentally for not having disposed of the damning emblem.

“I know nothing of the treasure,” he said angrily. “This gaud I took from the neck of a man I slew in a dark alley.” And that last was the truth.

“Thou art stubborn,” muttered Baber Khan; “but the steel shall teach thee. Grip him!”

Fierce hands clamped over the American’s mouth, and others held him hard, stretching him out. O’Donnell’s body was a knot of wiry thews, but with his hands bound, and three hairy giants grasping him, he was helpless. He felt Baber Khan’s fingers clutching at his ankle, lifting his foot; then the sharp agony of a knife point driving under the nail of his great toe. He set his teeth against the hurt, then it was withdrawn, and he felt blood trickling over his foot. The hand released his jaws.

“Where is the treasure?” hissed the savage voice out of the darkness.

“Let me up,” mumbled O’Donnell. “I’ll lead you to it.”

A gusty sigh of satisfaction answered him. He was hauled to his feet.

“Lead on,” Baber Khan directed. He did not promise O’Donnell his life in return for the secret of the treasure; the American knew that the treacherous Ghilzai had no intention of letting him live, in any event.

“We will go to the chamber in which was found the bodies of Shaibar Khan and Yar Akbar,” said he, and with a satisfied grunt, they allowed him to lead the way, grasping his arms, with their knives at his ribs.

They went on down the stair, through a tapestried door and down a short corridor. This corridor, lighted by Baber’s wavering torch, seemed to terminate against a blank marble wall. But all the palace knew its secret, since the invasion of the Turkomans, and the Ghilzai thrust against the wall with a burly shoulder. A section swung in, working on a pivot,

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Appendices

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Gunfighters of the Wild East

by

David A. Hardy

Francis Xavier Gordon, known from Stamboul to the China Sea as "El Borak" — the Swift — was perhaps the first of Robert E. Howard's characters to be created, before Solomon Kane, Bran Mak Morn, Kull, or Conan. Gordon was also one of the last of Howard's characters to emerge as a fully developed pulp-hero, the center of a series of short stories and novelettes. The contrast of first and last is but one of the many paradoxes of El Borak. The Gordon stories unite East and West, fantasy and reality, greed and selflessness, and a personal mythology that nonetheless reflects and comments on real-life adventures and other writers' works. Unlike most of Howard's other series, the El Borak stories were not the product of a short, defined period in the writer's career. They sprawl over a twenty-year span, drawing in motifs and elements from other works by Howard as well as generating variants on the central motif: the lone American wanderer who has cast his lot in the wildest reaches of Asia.

El Borak is a larger-than-life figure, yet there is a basic realism about his exploits. Part of that may be attributed to Howard's ever-increasing mastery of his story-telling skills and sharper focus on what he wanted to do with the El Borak series. But part may be that, however improbable Francis X. Gordon may seem on paper, the exploits of real-life soldiers of fortune, travelers, and empire builders are at least as fantastic. Arguably, Howard inserted some true-life episodes and elements into the El Borak stories in order to lend them a greater verisimilitude.

General Charles "Chinese" Gordon is sometimes cited as the inspiration for Francis X. Gordon's last name. "Chinese" Gordon earned his nickname leading the "Ever Victorious Army," a

Western-trained force of Chinese mercenaries, during the vicious T'ai-P'ing War of 1851–1867. The force was originally officered by some rather flamboyant Americans including a former Texas Ranger, Frederick Townsend Ward, and Henry Burgevine, who had served in the French army during the Crimean War. General Gordon later served as a field commander for the Khedive of Egypt alongside many American Civil War veterans as well as British, German, and Italian mercenary officers. General Gordon met his end in battle when the Sudanese dervishes overran his position at Khartoum. Howard used the Sudanese War as the setting for his tale "Guns of Khartum." While they share a name, there is little of Charles Gordon in Francis Xavier Gordon. Compared to colleagues like Ward and Burgevine, Gordon was respectable. He was a devout Salvation Army sort of Christian and never visited Afghanistan. Tellingly, when Howard used Khartoum as a setting his hero was not a commander, but a lowly foot-slogging American mercenary.

The exploits of T. E. Lawrence, known as "Lawrence of Arabia," have led some to suppose he was the basis for El Borak. Lawrence's very close identification with his Bedouin warriors was his most outstanding characteristic: among his peers he was unique in adopting the Bedouin life so fully. He employed disguise to scout enemy positions and fought in the thick of battle. Lawrence achieved a degree of celebrity thanks to a documentary and the book *With Lawrence in Arabia* by the American journalist Lowell Thomas. Lawrence's own memoir, *Revolt in the Desert*, was written as something of a corrective to Thomas's portrayal of him. Howard owned both books and found them of value when the time came to write the El Borak tales. But Lawrence is a peripheral influence on the El Borak tales. He was a scholarly Arabist who turned his hand to guerrilla warfare as an officer of the British army. El Borak is a swashbuckler, not a scholar, who operates independently of any governmental dictates.

In addition to Thomas's book on Lawrence, Howard also owned *Beyond Khyber Pass*, an account of Thomas's journey from Peshawar to Kabul by car in 1927. There is a distinct difference between Howard's writing and that of Thomas. Howard's tone is serious, even grim at times, and focused on conflict and derring-do, while Thomas is jaunty, despite the self-evident dangers of his surroundings. Many of the themes Thomas dwells on are common enough to the literature on Afghanistan and its neighbors, but a reader attuned to Howard's style can find many interesting echoes in *Beyond Khyber Pass*.

The book is copiously illustrated with photographs by Henry Chase, Thomas's veteran cameraman. One is a study of a Waziri tribesman, described as "wolf-like," surely one of Howard's favorite descriptives. At one point Thomas compares the Pathans to the Yaqui Indians of Sonora. It might seem like no more than a throwaway line — until one recalls that Gordon learned his tracking skills battling the Yaqui in Mexico. Details such as the sensational kidnapping of a British lady by Afridi bandits, the legend of Greek soldiers in remote Kafiristan, and the economics and politics of the rifle trade on the frontier all have echoes in the El Borak stories.

In *Beyond Khyber Pass* a reader can catch a glimpse of what so stirred Howard's imagination. Bandits murder travelers on the same stretch of road Thomas's party crosses. A British captain lays on a stirring demonstration of an Afridi raid as part of an exercise for his troops, and is killed the very next day in a real battle. Thomas and Chase are joined by David King, a dashing American veteran of the French Foreign Legion turned successful merchant in Calcutta. Their bodyguard is Niam Shah, a dapper, six-foot-tall Afridi, whose favorite phrase in English is "naughty boy shoot," as in "Don't go to Kabul, naughty boy shoot you." They travel to Kurram valley (home of Howard's Afridi friends), meet feuding tribal warriors, and learn "a snake, a Shinwari and a scorpion have never a heart to tame."

Witness Thomas's depiction of the varied humanity passing in the streets of Peshawar:

> From the uttermost confines of China to the walls of Jerusalem men come to Peshawar, bringing the commerce of a continent. Semites with corkscrew curls from Herat and Merv and merchants from Kashgar who have come down across the lonely Pamirs and the Malakand mingle with the men of the Zakka Khel. Here comes a group of gay lads from the uplands of Tirah, new to the city, bent on the delights of civilization and *charas*. In front of them saunter the more sophisticated youths of the plains, hand in hand, with roses behind their ears and their collyrium-painted eyes coquettishly glancing about and returning stare for stare. Beggars, thieves, dwarfs, human monstrosities with seal-like flippers where their arms ought to be, clowns, fakirs, rose-sellers, and purveyors of *charas* move on equal terms with handsome Roman-nosed Afridis, bobbed-haired bandits from Black Mountain, shaggy men from Yarkand, and scarlet-turbaned Rajput sepoys.

Lowell Thomas's vivid word pictures, his picturesque companions and the all-too real dangers of the trip surely enchanted and inspired the pulp writer from Cross Plains.

Howard owned at least one other firsthand account of travel in Afghanistan, Emil Trinkler's travelogue, *Through the Heart of Afghanistan*. Trinkler was a German geologist employed by a trading company based in Kabul. Trinkler does mention some things that appear as motifs in the El Borak stories, such as the kidnapping of a young British woman by a bandit chief, and notes the legend that the inhabitants of Nuristan (formerly Kafiristan) were descended from Alexander the Great's soldiers. But they amount to mere notices, things heard in passing. Getting the cook to make a decent breakfast or finding an unusual rock specimen were what really mattered to Trinkler. *Through the Heart of Afghanistan* is a very far cry from the headlong adventures of Howard's heroes.

While the exploits of Gordon, Lawrence, and Thomas were well known to Howard and the world, El Borak invites comparison with other, less well-known adventurers. There were in fact at least two historical American soldiers-of-fortune who, like

Howard's fictional Gordon, made their way into Afghanistan. Although the evidence for Howard's knowledge of them is speculative, Josiah Harlan and Alexander Gardner seem characters tailor-made for an El Borak story.

Josiah Harlan was a Quaker from Philadelphia who had served as a doctor for the East India Company's army in the Burmese war of 1825. In 1827 Harlan, in disguise as a Muslim fakir, made a reconnaissance of Afghanistan on behalf of the deposed ruler Shah Shujah. He later served as a military governor for Ranjit Singh, the Sikh ruler of the Punjab. Harlan eventually quit Ranjit Singh's service for the Sikh's rival, Dost Mohammed, the ruler of Afghanistan (and Shah Shujah's mortal enemy, too). In that capacity he commanded a force that crossed the Hindu Kush (with elephants, no less) and was made titular prince of Ghor by the Hazara tribesmen in that region. Harlan's biographer, Ben Macintyre, regards Harlan's elevation to royalty as the inspiration for Rudyard Kipling's tale "The Man Who Would be King." Harlan's grant of the princedom is still extant in a Pennsylvania archive.

Harlan's adventures, though, were almost tame compared to those of Alexander Haughton Campbell Gardner. Gardner was of Scots-Irish frontier stock, born in Wisconsin circa 1790 and reared in a town called Saint Xavier in colonial-era Texas. He entered Central Asia in 1823 and lived as a bandit, rebel chief and wanderer. In his travels he passed as an Arab and used the name Arb Shah (much as Howard's heroes often have a *nom de guerre*). Gardner served as a commander under Habibullah Khan, a rebel Afghan prince. He survived any number of battles with bandits, Uzbek warriors, and the forces of Dost Mohammed. Once, while famished in the snow-clad Hindu Kush mountains, Gardner even fought a pack of wolves for a dead sheep. Eventually he left Afghanistan and served as a colonel of artillery under Ranjit Singh. He dropped his alias, and the Sikhs called him "Gordana." If El Borak had a real-life stand-in, it was Gardner, who lived as an Afghan, traveled with tribal warriors, battled bandits and

warlords, and explored little-known lands. That Gardner was raised in Texas at a place named Saint Xavier and was known by the name Gordana seems almost too much to be merely coincidence when compared to a fictional Texas gunfighter named Francis Xavier Gordon.

While Howard certainly read of Chinese Gordon and Lawrence of Arabia, did he know of these romantic adventurers, Harlan and Gardner? It is not impossible. Although he makes no mention of them, Howard was a voracious reader who did not always mention his sources. Gardner's memoirs were published posthumously as *Soldier and Traveller* in 1898. Although Harlan had published a memoir in 1842, his manuscript, *Central Asia; personal narrative of Gen. Josiah Harlan 1823–1841*, was not published in the United States until 1939. Both men had been profiled in H.L.O. Garrett and C. Grey's book *European Adventurers of Northern India* and Harlan rated an entry in the Dictionary of American Biography. If nothing else it shows that Gordon has a certain realism: he is no more outlandish than the Quaker warlord or the Afghan outlaw from Wisconsin.

While many real-life adventurers blazed strange and bloody trails through the Wild East, El Borak is also part of a tradition of fictional adventurers. Howard avidly read the classics of the genre such as H. Rider Haggard, Jack London, Rafael Sabatini and Rudyard Kipling, as well as contemporary works by popular authors of the day such as George Allen England, Harold Lamb and Talbot Mundy. Howard's peers and friends — E. Hoffmann Price, Otis Adelbert Kline, Clark Ashton Smith, Warren Hastings Miller, and others — dabbled in the field of Oriental Adventure. An appreciation of the influence of Howard's favorite writers must also take into account just how much distance there was between Howard and his peers.

Howard singled out Rudyard Kipling and Talbot Mundy as among the best in writing adventure tales set in the Orient. His work was influenced by those writers, but could not in any sense be called derivative: the contrasts are striking and far-reaching.

Kipling did much to popularize and make respectable adventure tales set in the far corners of the British Empire, especially the Northwest Frontier between India and Afghanistan. But Kipling's subject matter is the *sahib log*, the Englishman in India. His classic novel *Kim* is the story of a semi-wild street child, acculturated to native norms. In time Kim learns British ways, and as a secret agent of the Empire serves to bridge the gap between Briton and native in the Great Game of Anglo-Russian rivalry. Even Mowgli, the wolf-boy from *The Jungle Book*, more barbaric than Conan, ends up fully civilized, with a wife and child and a job as a policeman. The life of a civil servant would be incomprehensible to a Howard hero; a policeman's lot would be anathema.

Howard's heroes move in the opposite direction from Kim and Mowgli. They are much closer to Daniel Dravot and Peachey Carnehan in *The Man Who Would Be King*. Kipling's protagonists are Britons seeking their fortune on the fringes of empire; Howard's are Americans who live among the warlike Bedouin or Pathans, Western Barbarians at home in the wilds of the East. More to the point, quite a few characters would be king in the El Borak tales. Kipling's influence may be seen in other aspects of the El Borak cycle, but *The Man Who Would Be King* has a special resonance with Howard's work.

Talbot Mundy was a major writer of adventure tales set on India's Northwest frontier. He was a regular contributor to the better pulp magazines like *Adventure* and *Argosy*, and several of his stories were adapted for film. Howard made no secret of his admiration for Mundy's writing, as evidenced by comments in letters to Tevis Clyde Smith and H. P. Lovecraft, as well as the selection of Mundy novels that he kept in his personal collection.

Certainly, one can find echoes of Mundy in the El Borak stories. Mundy's fictional heroes, James Schuyler Grim (known as Jimgrim) and Athelstan King, have some El Borak qualities. They are adventurers who must operate on their own. Their tramping grounds are the Afghan Frontier, the Middle East, and the

Himalayas. Sometimes they even take the side of the natives against that of imperial authority.

However, the differences between Howard and Mundy are conspicuous. Mundy's tales of Asia are heavily influenced by his interest in Theosophy. Secret societies and science-fictional super-weapons are commonplace. Mundy novels emphasize the battle of wills more than physical combat. The antagonism between the hero and the villain is often worked out through a secondary character, ostensibly a minion of the villain. Princess Baltis in *Jimgrim*, Lady Saffren Walden in *The Ivory Trail*, and Dawa Tsering in *OM: The Secret of Ahbor Valley* come to mind. While Mundy's heroes often have comparatively mundane motivations, such as finding a treasure, foiling a plot to rule Asia, or political intrigue, in many of his stories the heroes seek to conquer themselves and achieve spiritual advancement.

El Borak, like other Howard heroes, must survive physical confrontation to succeed. Action is the driving force of these tales. This is not to say Howard's tales lack characterization, dialogue or atmosphere, but in an El Borak story the battle is won or lost in *battle*. Howard's world of grim struggles for survival does not leave time for spiritual journeys.

Rafael Sabatini, well known for his swashbuckling adventure tales of pirates, may have been the source for Gordon's nickname. Most commentators have simply taken it for granted that Howard got the nickname "El Borak" from the name of the winged steed ("al-Buraq" in more modern transcriptions, "the swift one" or "lightning") that carried the prophet Mohammed from Jerusalem to Heaven. However, we may note Sabatini's 1915 novel *The Sea Hawk*, a tale of piratical derring-do in which we find a Barbary corsair known as "Biskaine… el-Borak was he called from the lightning-like impetuousness in which he was wont to strike." There is reason to think Howard may have been influenced by *The Sea Hawk* in other ways. The protagonist, Sir Oliver Tressilian, is an English privateer captain who joins the corsairs, which

certainly fits the pattern of a West European fighting man living among Muslims.

Gordon's origins as a Texas gunslinger link him to the Western genre, but the stylized trappings of the gunslinger myth explored by Zane Grey, Max Brand, and many others are conspicuous by their absence. Saloons, cowpokes, gamblers, cattle drives, and sheriffs do not readily translate to Afghanistan. But James Fenimore Cooper's iconic take on the frontiersman does.

Rooted in colonial captivity narratives, the legend of the frontier scout is about border warfare, especially the rescue of captive white women from tribal warriors who confront the advance of empire. The scout is the only man who can rescue captives from the Indians. But to do so, he must know Indian lore intimately, even to the point of identifying with the Indians. Cooper's hero Natty Bumppo is raised by Indians and has a foot on both sides of the frontier. Among the Indians he is known as "Hawkeye" (one of many nicknames). The name is granted for his superior marksmanship, but also marks a special relationship with the Indians. Gordon may not have been raised by Bedouin, but he too has a special name. Gordon has one foot in the Western world he left behind, and he is ever ready to respond to its demands, albeit on his own terms. "El Borak" is the side of him that is assimilated into the tribal life of Afghanistan and Arabia. He is utterly at ease whether in a Bedouin camp or a city of outlaws in Turkestan. The captive/rescue motif is a recurring one in the El Borak stories.

Although many influences went into the making of the El Borak stories, they are a unique product of a highly original writer. H.P. Lovecraft remarked, "It is hard to describe precisely what made Mr. Howard's stories stand out so sharply; but the real secret is that he himself is in everyone of them, whether they were ostensibly commercial or not." Lovecraft's words are more than simply a polite eulogy of a friend. Gordon is the core of a cycle of stories that grew over a twenty-year period. This cycle brings together the protagonist and supporting characters as well as alter

egos of the protagonist. The El Borak cycle crosses disparate locales, boasts several leading characters, and even crosses genres. Yet despite that diversity, there is a remarkable consistency of themes and motifs over many stages of Howard's professional career.

Gordon first appeared in print in the December 1934 issue of *Top Notch*, but he had been a long time in coming. Howard revealed a bit about the character's origin to fan Alvin Earl Perry. The details were published in "A Short Biographical Sketch of Robert E. Howard" in the June 1935 edition of *Fantasy Magazine*. Perry quotes Howard: "The first character I ever created was Francis Xavier Gordon, El Borak, the hero of 'The Daughter of Erlik Khan' (*Top Notch*), etc. I don't remember his genesis. He came to life in my mind when I was about ten years old." Then, speaking of another character, Bran Mak Morn, Howard added, "Physically he bore a striking resemblance to El Borak."

This comment about similarity between Bran Mak Morn and Gordon is significant. Howard was careful and consistent in describing his characters. Both Bran Mak Morn and Gordon are compact men, not physically large, but incredibly strong. Their hair and complexions are dark and their eyes are an icy, intense black. Of course there was a practical side to this. A dark complexioned, dark eyed man can disguise himself as an Arab or Afghan more easily than a fair, blue-eyed fellow. But Howard used physical appearance to denote racial origin, not just in a broad sense, but with a very exact, almost tribal specificity. In "Hawk of the Hills," Gordon describes himself as being of Highland Scotch and Black Irish descent. Those are the very groups identified in Howard's day as modern descendants of the Picts. Much as Howard created a mythical global migration for the Picts, so Gordon acts out the racial memory of the Pictish *volkerwanderung* in the crossroads of conquest employed by the Bronze-Age Aryans, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane and so many others.

It is characteristic of Howard that Gordon, Bran Mak Morn, and Solomon Kane were hold-overs from boyhood daydreams. A writer who can take the germ of an idea he had as a youngster and, after an eighteen-year span, craft it into polished work at the peak of his career proves the validity of Lovecraft's eulogy.

Long before this polished work, however, Howard had attempted to commit Gordon to paper. Between 1922 and 1923 he began a number of Gordon stories, but none have come to us complete. One of these, "The Iron Terror," provides an interesting look at both Howard as a writer and the character of Gordon. Gordon is plotting a revolt in Arabia as a first step to conquering his own empire. This touches on a theme that runs like a blood-soaked thread through the fabric of Howard's tales: the usurper who wins a throne by dint of his indomitable will to power. That is part of the basic identity of Kull, and the Conan stories begin with the hero unsteady on his new throne. In "The Iron Terror" Gordon meets with an arms-dealer who compares Gordon to Genghis Khan. There is a brief exchange that might serve to describe many Howard heroes.

"I am no soldier," says Gordon.

The arms dealer replies, "No, you are a conqueror."

Howard's conquerors are not men who direct others from behind a desk, nor are they uniformed servants of the state. They are utterly free, wild, and ferocious in their will to power. When Howard was writing "The Iron Terror" he was struggling to find his own road. Becoming a full-time writer in the face of his parents' reservations required much determination. Howard was no one else's soldier, he followed a lonely road to conquer the life he wanted.

At the same time Howard manages to question the worth of conquest and imperial glory. Although clearly fascinated by self-willed men who imposed their rule on the world, Howard regularly raised existential questions that suggest the futility of such a life.

“My road is my own,” Gordon replied.

“Aye, and you will travel it. Like all conquerors. They came, they saw, they conquered! Where are they now?

“Here is the dagger that was carried by Genghis Khan. But where is Genghis Khan? So all conquerors go!”

Just as much as Howard returned to the theme of the usurper, he returned to the ephemeral nature of glory.

The Gordon stories from this period are unfinished, but they form a framework of motifs that bear on the mature tales. One, published as “The Coming of El Borak,” concerns an English woman kidnapped by Afghan tribesmen. This fragment introduces a pair of supporting characters, the cheerful warrior Khoda Khan and the intense and brooding Yar Ali Khan. Gordon appears only at the end of the fragment. Both Khoda Khan and Yar Ali Khan appear in several other unfinished stories, as does Lal Singh, a Sikh warrior.

What is striking is that the story is told entirely in the first person by Khoda Khan. Howard liked to shift the point of view character and told several of the later El Borak stories using an alternate central character. However, he never again used an Afghan narrator to tell an El Borak story.

The motif of rescuing a white woman from the natives is a well-worn theme. In fact, about the time Howard was writing the early El Borak stories, a British *mem-sahib* was captured by rebellious tribesmen. In 1923, a gang led by Ajab Khan Afridi, a Pathan gun-runner who had a score to settle with the British, attacked the home of a British officer, Colonel Ellis. The raiders killed Col. Ellis’s wife and kidnapped his daughter. The story was reported in *The Dallas Morning News*, so Howard may well have read of it at the time. Admittedly, Miss Ellis was not rescued by a grim-faced American gunslinger. Instead the British employed a medical missionary, Mrs. Lillian Starr, and a local civil servant, Kuli Khan. Mrs. Starr wrote an account of her negotiations for Miss Ellis’ release in her 1923 memoir, *Tales of Tirah and Lesser Tibet*.

Another of the early stories, published as “Khoda Khan’s Tale,” introduces “El Borak” as Gordon’s *nom de guerre*. The name means “the swift,” and indicates his deadly speed with gun and sword and fast thinking under pressure. The name also gives depth to Gordon, giving a name to the Asian side of his character.

Howard gave the theme of empire building a twist in a piece published under the title “Intrigue in Kurdistan.” The setting is a Turkish castle with an elaborate network of secret passages, a motif that would recur in several El Borak stories. Gordon instigates a Kurdish revolt, ostensibly to forge an empire with himself as ruler. His true motive is revenge for Turkish atrocities against Armenians. The subject had been employed by Talbot Mundy in his 1920 novel, *The Eye of Zeitoon*, in which his heroes hold an Armenian fort in a desperate battle with Turkish troops. Characteristically, Howard’s protagonist is far more ruthless in his approach. Gordon’s revolt is intended to provoke European intervention that would destroy Turkey as an independent country. Gordon is quite frank in his desire to see a mass slaughter of the Turks and Kurds. In his essay, “A Touch of Trivia,” Howard reflected on his personal reactions to historical events. His judgment on the Turks was harsh:

> Say what you will, wholesale massacre is never justifiable — I mean the slaughter of helpless people. Except in the following case: when a nation has over and over again proved itself to be absolutely without mercy, as in the case of the Turks with the Armenians, it is in my mind no crime but a duty of the nations to extirpate them, to destroy all men capable of bearing [arms] and to scatter the helpless people far and wide, not in barren exile to die, but to be absorbed by other races.

The motif of building an empire on the slaughter of entire races would return in the last and most ferocious of the El Borak stories, “Son of the White Wolf.”

There are other fragments that show Howard was still experimenting with Gordon’s setting, character, and even his nickname. Some are efforts at “Lost Race” stories: tales of quests for lost treasure in unexplored regions. H. Rider Haggard’s

romances have a strong influence here, and several are in fact set in Africa. Fantastic elements such as living dinosaurs and a cursed ruin appear in a couple of the fragments. In the fragment published as “A Power Among the Islands” Gordon appears as a sailor nicknamed “Wolf Gordon,” echoing Jack London’s Wolf Larsen from *The Sea Wolf*.

There are several fragments in which Gordon is paired with Steve Allison, a drifting Western outlaw who nonetheless has a double life as a New York sophisticate. Howard later developed Steve Allison as the “Sonora Kid,” a gunslinger in Western tales, mercifully dropping the New York connection.

In one of these Allison/Gordon fragments Gordon is referred to as “Diego Valdez,” and Allison responds by quoting two lines of Kipling’s poem, “The Song of Diego Valdez.” The narrator of Kipling’s poem tells how he found his ease in adventure on the high seas, but when he became “Diego Valdez, High Admiral of Spain,” the duties of his public persona deprived him of the wild and free life of an adventurer. The tension between duty to office and to others and the desire to seek adventure for its own sake is a motif in some of Howard’s best Conan stories, such as “Black Colossus” and “Hour of the Dragon.” Was this how he conceived of Gordon? When El Borak reappeared in the ’30s, he was no longer a treasure hunter or a man seeking a crown, but a very different character.

From 1923 until 1933, as Howard worked to establish himself as a professional writer, El Borak lay dormant. But as the young author sought to expand into new markets as the Depression settled over the land, and his old standbys *Weird Tales* and *Fight Stories* struggled, the Desert Gunfighter made a comeback. Aiming at the adventure-story magazines, Howard experimented with the idea, in the process creating what might be thought of as an extended El Borak cycle, which includes not only the stories of Gordon, but those with other characters as well. Taken as a group, they help define what El Borak is and is not.

One tale that could fairly be considered part of this extended El Borak canon is “The Fire of Asshurbanipal.” According to Glenn Lord it was probably written in the early thirties and later re-written. The re-write was published in *Weird Tales* in December of 1936. The heroes are Steve Clarney, an American adventurer, and his companion, Yar Ali, a giant Afridi warrior. Yar Ali is a variation on Yar Ali Khan, Gordon’s bear-like Afridi friend. Steve Clarney, while not explicitly called a Texan, speaks in Texan dialect. Clarney and Yar Ali are searching for a giant ruby, known as “the Fire of Asshurbanipal,” deep in the interior of Arabia away from the Persian Gulf. The gem is said to be clutched in the hands of a mummified king on a throne in a desolate, haunted ruin.

The business of the ruby has its immediate antecedents in “The Blood of Belshazzar,” a story from the Cormac FitzGeoffrey series. In that tale the Crusader protagonist learns of a giant ruby, found by a pearl diver clutched in the hand of a skeleton on a throne sunk to the bottom of the Persian Gulf. In “The Fire of Asshurbanipal” the throne is moved to a more plausible location on land, though the pearl diver still gets a cameo.

In October 1934, a new Howard story featuring an American adventurer seeking a vast treasure in city of outlaws hidden deep in Central Asia appeared in *Top Notch Magazine*. The name of the dauntless swordsman was Kirby O’Donnell. Despite all the effort Howard put into creating Gordon over the years, it was Kirby O’Donnell that saw print first. Howard had written two O’Donnell stories in close succession, “Gold from Tatary” and “Swords of Shahrazar.” The second tale is a sequel to the first. For whatever reason, *Top Notch* bought “Swords of Shahrazar” but did not buy “Gold from Tatary,” which was published in *Thrilling Adventures* in January 1935.

There is a degree of similarity between O’Donnell and Gordon, enough that some might think of O’Donnell as an alternate version of Gordon. O’Donnell is Irish-American while Gordon is Scots-Irish. Both have a *nom de guerre:* O’Donnell’s is “Ali el Ghazi.” Both are able to disguise themselves as natives. Both men

are dark haired, of medium height yet well muscled, and have skin bronzed by the sun. Gordon's comrade-in-arms is Yar Ali Khan, a ferocious and gloomy killer; O'Donnell gets help from Yar Muhammed, a cheerful bandit. O'Donnell's eyes are Aryan-blue while Gordon's are Pictish-black. To a superficial critic Gordon and O'Donnell might seem like cookie-cutter heroes, mass-produced by Howard. The critical difference between the characters is in their motives and reactions to the situations they encounter.

The crux of "Gold from Tatary" and "Swords of Shahrazar" is O'Donnell's friendship with Orkhan Bahadur, a dashing yet ruthless Turkoman khan. The complicating factor in that friendship is a massive pile of gold amassed by the Khan of Khuwarezm and hidden since the Mongol invasion of the 1200s. Ultimately, O'Donnell faces a choice: get his share of the loot and let Orkhan Bahadur take the rest, which the khan will use to finance bloody wars of conquest, or deny Orkhan Bahadur (and himself) the gold but thereby risk a violent break with his friend. This story isn't about getting the loot, it is about the moral dilemma of having the loot. Instead of predictable pulp-fiction plot-complications the reader finds a resolution that pits the hero's self-seeking instinct against his impulse to do what is best for others. It is indicative of Howard's fascination with and ambivalence towards conquering warlords that Orkhan Bahadur, no matter how sympathetic, doesn't get the money to make war.

When O'Donnell disposes of the gold, he finds himself being blackmailed. Herein lies an even greater difference between O'Donnell and Gordon. Where Gordon's dynamic personality allows him to dominate any situation, O'Donnell tends to follow the path of least resistance. Though he is a savage fighter, O'Donnell has to wait for his opportunity to come rather than making it, El Borak style.

The treasure of Shahrazar links these tales into Howard's cycle of Crusader tales. In "Sowers of the Thunder," the protagonist, Cahal O'Donnel, rides into the East in search of the treasure of

Shahazar, where the sultans sent their gold. A character in the tale tells of a legendary raid on the treasure by Cormac FitzGeoffrey. However, Cahal doesn't find the gold. Instead he finds the shattered remnants of the Kharesmian Turks fleeing the Mongols. Despite the variations in spelling, Shahazar and Kharesmian are cognates of Shahrazar and Khuwarezm. None of this would have been particularly apparent to readers of the tales, as the stories were published in different magazines over a period of several years. Nor is it precisely economy of ideas, any treasure would do, as would any name for a hidden city. What one finds here is a personal mythology in which the connections are only apparent to a reader lucky enough to have all the material at hand. Lovecraft's observation holds true for Kirby O'Donnell just as for El Borak.

There is a third O'Donnell story which remained unpublished in Howard's lifetime. "The Trail of the Blood-Stained God" continues the treasure hunt motif. O'Donnell plays the part of the honest thief, who seeks treasure without succumbing to the amoral avarice that brings the others to their doom. It is as if Howard wanted to resurrect the treasure hunting aspect of Gordon, but didn't see that as part of Gordon's character anymore. The El Borak of the 1930s is more of an idealist, while O'Donnell carries his greedier side.

Just as Gordon is too large to be contained in his own stories, Howard's supporting cast was too restless to corral in Central Asia. Khoda Khan shows up in "Names in the Black Book," a story Howard wrote in 1934 during his brief fling with the detective genre. Khoda Khan is a supporting character, this time with Detective Steve Harrison and Joan La Tour in a sequel to "Lord of the Dead." Essentially the tale is a Fu Manchu pastiche. Howard's underworld has no gangsters as such, instead being full of swaggering swordsmen from the Djebel Druse and the Hindu Kush. The villain is not a civilized Chinese in imitation of Fu Manchu, but a Mongol, a criminally minded heir to Genghis Khan. This Tamerlane of the Underworld is named Erlik Khan, thus

linking him to the devil-worship cult of the Black Kirghiz in “The Daughter of Erlik Khan.”

Much as the Conan stories gleefully pillage freely from history and genre fiction, “Lord of the Dead” and “Names in the Black Book” mix a cast more at home in an El Borak tale into a detective story. Incongruous though it may be, the strategy is not a bad one. Dashiell Hammett wrote detective stories and added the trappings of adventure fiction, most notably in *The Maltese Falcon*. Unfortunately, Howard’s interlude with the detective genre proved to be a dead-end.

While the stories of Steve Clarney and Kirby O’Donnell are entertaining, full of vigor and action, these treasure hunters lacked something: for whatever reason, they were not the character into which Howard could really put himself. He had to return to his boyhood dreams.

In November 1933 Howard sent “Swords of the Hills” to his agent, Otis Adelbert Kline. With this tale El Borak was back. Howard used quite a few of his favorite themes: the adventurer with dreams of conquest, the lost city, and he even put a boxing match in the story. One distinction that signals the turn that Gordon was to take in the stories written in the ’30s is that the man seeking an empire is the villain. The Genghis Khan-Gordon of the “Iron Terror” is gone.

Essentially the tale inverts Kipling’s “The Man Who Would Be King.” Kipling’s protagonists, Carnehan and Dravot, find a hidden kingdom founded by Alexander the Great in remote Afghanistan. They usurp the kingship, but soon are overthrown. Dravot is cast over a cliff to his death; Carnehan is crucified, but survives (shades of Conan in “A Witch Shall be Born”!), bearing away Dravot’s crowned skull, a memento strongly indicative of the hollow nature of glory.

In “Swords of the Hills,” Gordon visits a valley of long-lost Alexandrian Greeks and wins the right to be king by defeating the ruler in single combat. But Gordon refuses to make himself king:

his goal is to stop the plot of Hunyadi, not to exploit the people of Iskander. Where Hunyadi (or Dravot and Carnehan or even Conan) reaches for power, Gordon is self-denying. From a practical perspective, Howard's heroes tend to be peripatetic loners and kingdoms are not usually portable. Kingship is an end-point, not a beginning.

"Swords of the Hills" has an almost naive preoccupation with feats of strength. Gordon's physical strength, endurance, and agility all play a role in defining him. In "Swords of the Hills," his physical prowess is pushed to its limit. The reader has a sense that the hero is mortal, that his eventual victory is hard won and not a foregone conclusion.

But "Swords of the Hills" goes beyond that. There is a subtle sense that the Greek ideal of the athletic body is at work. Gordon's entree into Attalus comes from freeing a man trapped by a massive boulder, a dramatic use of strength to save a life. At one point Bardylis even admires Gordon's physique, "devoid… of surplus flesh." The very kingship of Attalus itself is determined by who can best the king in a no-holds-barred fight.

Although Kline was unable to sell "Swords of the Hills," Howard apparently retained an interest in it. In *One Who Walked Alone*, Novalyne Price Ellis recalled that Howard said he was he was studying Alexander the Great's conquests and colonization of Central Asia. He told her that he intended to write a story about one such colony surviving intact until the present day. Either Price Ellis mis-remembered and Howard told her he *had* written such a tale, or perhaps he was writing a new one.

In any case Howard was committed to writing El Borak stories. In December 1933 he sent Kline the typescript for "The Daughter of Erlik Khan." This story would see publication in the December 1934 issue of *Top Notch* as a "novel." *Top Notch* typically ran a novelette as its lead feature calling it a novel. Although Howard's work had that distinction, it did not get the cover illustration.

The story offers a nod to Talbot Mundy in the form of the heroine Yasmeena, echoing Mundy's Yasmini, and also revisits the narrative elements of "The Man Who Would Be King," but this time the motifs are even more rearranged. Instead of being loveable rogues like Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot, Ormond and Pembroke are murderers, devoid of principle, unable to show loyalty even to each other. The Black Kirghiz are an isolated pagan tribe much like Kipling's Kafiris. But the Black Kirghiz have no noble heritage from Greece's glory. They are squalid devil worshipers, "bestial" and "ignorant of all but evil." The Black Kirghiz recognize a talisman of authority just as the Kafirs do and allow the Englishmen to pass. But it is not the Masonic symbol of universal brotherhood, it is a token from Yasmeena. The Black Kirghiz have no interest in or much connection to the outside world. Where Dravot impersonates a god in order to assume power, Yasmeena finds that the role of divinity is thrust upon her. Moreover, there is no power in being a goddess in Yolgan. Rather she is a prisoner. Her sole desire is to escape and resume an ordinary life in India.

Just as "The Daughter of Erlik Khan" inverts familiar motifs from Kipling, the classic Western motifs devised by Cooper are rearranged. The traditional narrative is about restoring a captive white woman to civilization and domesticity. But Yasmeena is not white, her father is a native of Yolgan and her mother is Indian. Although she is a prisoner of the Black Kirghiz, Yasmeena arrives voluntarily. Domesticity is what she fled, if that concept can extend to a psychopathic husband who intends to beat her to death with a slipper. El Borak offers escape, but nothing else. There is no cabin on the Afghan border with Mrs. Yasmeena Gordon raising young 'uns. Yasmeena says, "[Y]our soul is a whetted blade on which I feared I might cut myself." El Borak is simply a violent means to an end.

While Gordon may seem like a superman, his physical limits factor strongly. By the end of the story, Gordon is nearly drunk with fatigue. His face is like a grinning skull and his feet leave

bloody smears on the rock. The feats of strength celebrated in "Swords of the Hills" have become a grim test of endurance.

While Howard emphasized Gordon's physical prowess, he also carefully crafted Gordon's personality. Self-assurance and duty are Gordon's hallmarks, a sharp antithesis to Kirby O'Donnell. When his friend Achmet is murdered deep in a remote region full of bloodthirsty savages, Gordon does not turn back for reinforcements, he does not indulge in histrionics, nor even pause to consider options. He simply builds a cairn for his friend and goes after the killers. "Blood must pay for blood. That was as certain in Gordon's mind as hunger is certain in the mind of a gray timber wolf." Diego Valdez has returned as an avenger.

Gordon's single-mindedness parallels his utter confidence. Just as he has no doubts about his purpose, Gordon never betrays doubts about himself. "[H]is bearing was no more self-conscious among a hundred cutthroats hovering on the edge of murder than it would have been among friends." Gordon's attitude alone allows him to dominate situations in which compromise would end in certain death. When attitude will not serve, El Borak backs up his words with deeds. He provokes a fight with a bandit chief with no other aim than taking over the outlaw band. He ruthlessly cuts down a bandit who attempts a mutiny. Gordon threatens torture and death against Yogok to secure the priest's cooperation.

Yet all the mayhem is directed ultimately toward the goal of helping a friend. Gordon's initial motive is revenge, but he shifts his priority to rescuing Yasmeena when he realizes her predicament. He has no hesitation in using the Turkoman bandits to his own ends and enforcing his will with death. But once the bandits accept Gordon as their leader, he accepts responsibility to them. His duty to Yasmeena is balanced very delicately against his duty to bring the Turkomans out alive. Even Yogok will earn his freedom. The Diego Valdez aspect of Gordon is more than revenge and death.

Gordon's devotion to duty reinforces the distinctive characterization of the supporting cast. Their motivations and

attitudes are not muted by romanticism or glossed over as incomprehensible. They stand in sharp relief to the almost dreamlike fantasy of savage tribes, impenetrable mountains, hidden treasure, and devil-worship. Yogok, the high priest of an ancient cult that worships a pre-human deity of pure evil, wants to get rid of Yasmeena and her influence without arousing the ire of her worshippers. Like so many other politicians, he wants to eat his cake and have it too. Howard details Yogok's network of spies and assassins to good effect and has the arch-priest betray more-or-less every other character that crosses his path. Yogok is a memorably sleazy villain, anti-romantic in that he could easily be transplanted to a political thriller or a hard-boiled crime story.

Yasmeena, the princess in need of rescue, may seem to come from a fairy tale, but Howard does not leave it at that. She has fled a murderously possessive husband, disgusted with the hypocrisy and conformity of bourgeois life. The alternative, Yogok's primitive police state, is equally disillusioning. The result is a personal paralysis that only Gordon's dynamic action can break through. Howard invests some well-thought out existential dilemmas in Yasmeena.

The contrasts between Gordon, Yogok and Yasmeena are striking. Both Yogok and Yasmeena are self-absorbed, the one pursuing furious activity scrupling at nothing to protect his power, the other relying on someone else to save her from her own decision. El Borak is courageous, self-sacrificing, loyal to friends and followers and bent not on gain, but on justice. Above all, it is duty that motivates Gordon, even to the gang of bloodthirsty Turkoman bandits whose leadership he assumes. Gordon seems almost an abstraction, personifying the need to lift oneself out of the trap of self-pitying inaction, but not at the cost of falling into the trap of utter selfishness.

It was almost a year before Howard produced his next El Borak tale, but it was his longest. "Three-Bladed Doom" is a 42,000 word novella. The themes are familiar ones, a dream of empire, a lost city and an ancient cult of devil-worshippers. Even allowing

for a high degree of imagination on Howard's part, he also employed some well-researched history.

Howard refers to Othman's outlaws as *fedauis* and *batinis. Fedaui* has its modern variant in the *term fedayeen*, used for Arab guerilla fighters in Palestine and Iraq. *Batini* on the other hand is a bit more obscure. It is a term used by Medieval Muslim heresiographers for those who claimed an esoteric knowledge of the Koran. The *batinis* accepted all religions as one; no believer was barred from their brotherhood. Othman adopts this ecumenical view wholeheartedly and opens his fortress to *any* devil-worshipper or criminal in order to create his all-Asian Mafia of cultists and killers.

A more spectacular motif derives from Marco Polo's account of the Old Man of the Mountain. The Old Man was the legendary leader of the Assassins, who ruled his secret armies from a remote mountain fortress. The Old Man claimed authority based on his direct access to God. Recruits to the Assassins were drugged and taken to a secret pleasure garden where they awoke and enjoyed the pleasures of fine foods, wine, and beautiful women. The *fedauis* were told they were in Paradise itself enjoying the delights promised to loyal fighters for Islam. Then they were drugged again and returned to service. The Old Man sent his devoted *fedauis* on what were often suicide missions, reinforced in the belief that they would return to the Paradise they had seen if they died doing their duty.

Three-Bladed Doom is a product of the 1930s, yet it seems to summon modern fears of terrorism and political violence. When Gordon finally meets Othman, the Assassin leader relates how he funded his organization using money from "minerals" (oil, perhaps?) in Persia. Later it is revealed that some European power, perhaps Czarist Russia, is supporting Othman. The image of an oil-rich Iranian funding terrorism, state-sponsored terror, religious radicalism, and suicide-assassins yearning for a paradise of beautiful virgins have strong resonance with the twenty-first century's nightmare of global terrorism.

Three-Bladed Doom is full of echoes from the early Gordon fragments and other Howard tales. Gordon's past as a sailor in the South Seas ("A Power Among the Islands") is mentioned. Othman's city has an elaborate network of secret passages like the fortress in "Intrigue in Kurdistan." Gordon senses himself to be a reincarnation of a Crusader, echoing Cormac FitzGeoffrey and other Howard heroes. Ancient Greece, so central to "Swords of the Hills," influences *Three-Bladed Doom*. Like a modern Theseus, Gordon enters a labyrinth occupied not by a Minotaur, but a variant on the Yeti. Howard also revived two of Gordon's companions from the early tales: Yar Ali Khan and Lal Singh. Any two names would have sufficed for these supporting characters, but Howard retained these names, pulling them out of unpublished, unfinished stories. Perhaps simply naming a character helped fix his personality and characteristics. But there is something in drawing on these hidden sources that strongly suggests the presence of a personal mythology.

When Howard wrote *Three-Bladed Doom*, Czarist Russia was long-gone, but the Great Game motif lingered on. Like Kipling's Kim, Gordon is called upon to thwart a Russian threat to British India. While Kim can rely on his status as an agent of the British Empire, Gordon's strength is his utter lack of official support. That allows him to infiltrate the Assassin stronghold by pretending to be a wanted man. It is more than a mere plot device. Howard's repertoire of characters are individualists to a man. But there is a refinement of that in Gordon. Kim's two-sided life is united in service to the empire. Gordon is always at odds with those he helps most. He is part Gordon, the frontiersman who keeps the peace of the frontier, and part El Borak, an Afghan warrior who follows only his own dictates. In a passage explaining how El Borak manages to infiltrate the outlaw Assassins, Howard explains:

> He had no reverence for the authority which bedecks itself in pomp and arrogance and arbitrary worship of precedence, and he did have an abiding contempt for certain types of officials, whether civilian or military; so he was

> violently hated by the latter, and their opinion was sometimes accepted by the unthinking as an index of governmental opinion. But the men who actually rule India, moving unobtrusively behind the scenes, knew El Borak for what he really was, and though they did not always approve of his methods, they were his friends, and they had profited by his aid time and again.

Howard never did find a publisher for "Three Bladed Doom," despite cutting it down to 24,000 words and re-writing it at least twice. The short version cuts quickly to the climactic battle, and ends on an uncharacteristic note, with Gordon knocked unconscious and the denouement related secondhand. It is a very weak ending, strongly at odds with the dynamic personality that sets El Borak apart from Steve Clarney and Kirby O'Donnell.

While "Three Bladed Doom" remained unpublished in Howard's life, the Gordon short stories were making a mark. *Top Notch* ran two El Borak yarns, "Hawk of the Hills" and "Blood of the Gods," in June and July of 1935 respectively. Both had the lead spots as the issues' "novels," with accompanying cover illustrations.

"Hawk of the Hills" marks a turn from the "Lost Race" theme that predominated earlier. Its subject is a savage feud in the Afghan hills. With the more fantastic elements gone, "Hawk of the Hills" takes on a new grittiness. The El Borak stories had never been overly sentimental. "The Daughter of Erlik Khan" has homicidal ex-husbands and tribal women weeping over their slain menfolk. But in "Hawk" there are no heaps of treasure or lost cities to discover, only new shades of darkness in the human heart. It is as if Yasmeena's disillusionment has become general. Men casually barter for the heads of their enemies. Betrayal and murder by ambush are the norm. Khoda Khan views the aftermath of battle thus:

> The heap at the foot of the stairs was no longer a merciful blur, for the moon outlined it in pitiless detail. Dead horses and dead men lay in a tangled gory mound with rifles and sword blades thrust out of the pile like weeds growing out of a scrap heap. There must have been at least a dozen horses, and almost as many men in that shambles.

"A shame to waste good horses thus," muttered Khoda Khan.

"Hawk of the Hills" is more like a Western than any of the earlier El Borak stories. Yet the comparison cannot be pushed too far. "Hawk of the Hills" has none of the trappings of a cliché horse-opera. There is no sentimentality to the mayhem. The story exists at the battle-front, with only the burned ruins of villages to suggest a life outside of war. The belief in impartiality and compromise is shown to be a web of lies and self-deception. The Wild East is won by war to the last man. This is less the West of Zane Grey than that of Sam Peckinpah.

Perhaps not "Western," but "Texan" would be a better term for "Hawk of the Hills," for the story echoes the savage feuds chronicled by Texas historians such as C. L. Sonnichsen and C. L. Douglas. The feuding Afghan clans are subject to manipulation by outside forces: the Russians, the Amir, and the British Empire. But the feudists are quite capable of resisting, and of doing some manipulating of their own. The crisis could be a feud in Reconstruction Texas, with rival ranching clans battling it out while outside politicians and business interests try to take advantage of the bloodletting. That the scenario in "Hawk of the Hills" is perfectly believable in Afghanistan or Texas perhaps indicates that the basic truths about power, greed, and hate become evident when handled by a great writer.

A distinctive feature of "Hawk of the Hills" is that Howard uses Willoughby, the British diplomat, as his point-of-view character. There is a utilitarian function to multiple viewpoints: Howard can reveal or withhold information to create surprises or build tension. But the diplomat is more than a mere device. Willoughby's presence turns the story into a skirmish in the battle between "civilization and barbarism" played out in Howard's fiction and his voluminous correspondence with H. P. Lovecraft. One may wish to amend that phrase to "society vs. individualism." In earlier tales Gordon confronts outsiders, men who are not integrated into Afghan life as Gordon is. But wolfish

adventurers like Hunyadi, Ormond, or Pembroke hardly represent "civilized" values. Willoughby, on the other hand, regards society's interests as higher than the individual's. "You're sacrificing the welfare of the many to avenge the blood of the few," is Willoughby's assessment of El Borak's feud with Afdal Khan.

For Gordon a necessary corollary to loyalty in life is revenge after death. It is a minor theme in "Daughter of Erlik Khan," while in "Hawk of the Hills," Gordon makes the philosophy of revenge explicit. To leave his friends' murder un-avenged would be to "throw [them] aside like a worn out scabbard!" Thus Gordon justifies his loyalty to others, by arguing in favor of individualism.

Willoughby provides a further viewpoint of El Borak's physical abilities, explored in "Swords of the Hills" and "The Daughter of Erlik Khan." Gordon's natural surroundings are a nightmare world for Willoughby. They are not just exhausting, but also disorienting and terrifying. "Willoughby always remembered that flight over the mountains as a sort of nightmare in which he was hustled along by ragged goblins thorough black defiles…" Although "Hawk" lacks the sheer fantasy of "Erlik Khan" or "Swords of the Hills," it retains a brooding, Gothic atmosphere.

Moreover, the reader gets a chance to respect Willoughby's mission of peace. As a peripheral character, the Englishman would simply be a hindrance for Gordon to push aside, but as the central character, Howard allows the reader to identify with Willoughby as a flawed but genuine seeker of peace. He agrees to climb down a dangerous cliff in order to end the feud, and readily meets with armed and dangerous men without any protection save his moral standing as a diplomat. He nearly bluffs a group of hostile tribal warriors into escorting him out of a dangerous region. For Willoughby, the risks are simply what he must undertake to end the feud. In Howard's fiction the basic worth of a man is measured in physical and moral courage, and Willoughby is shown to have both.

“Hawk of the Hills” also reveals a bit about how Howard used his research. In *Beyond Khyber Pass* there is a brief passage in which Thomas describes the economics of rifles on the Afghan border. British rifles were the best, but very difficult to obtain. Soviet rifles were known for good quality and moderate price. Locally made copies of foreign firearms were the cheapest, but also of questionable quality. While Howard does not dump all that information on the reader of “Hawk,” Gordon explains how Afdal Khan is using Russian rifles to aggrandize himself while the Russians are using Afdal Khan for the same purpose.

Strangely enough, the same theme, explained in greater detail, appeared in Howard’s “Murderer’s Grog,” a “spicy” story that used British India as its setting. One wonders what the editor made of dialogue about arms trafficking in the middle of a risqué tale.

“Blood of the Gods” appeared in the July 1935 issue of *Top Notch*. As with Yasmeena in “The Daughter of Erlik Khan,” Al Wazir must be saved from a stalled, self-absorbed life by Gordon’s dynamism. Disillusioned with palace life, Al Wazir renounced both wealth and power and went to live in the desert of the *Ruba al Khali* with nothing but a copy of the *Bhagavat-Gita*. After his rescue by Gordon, Al Wazir rejects solitary contemplation, vowing to serve his fellow man. It is almost trite except for Howard’s own troubled views on the worth of life. Howard once insisted that, “For life to be worth living a man… must have a great love or a great cause.” One may wonder how much of Howard, toiling alone with his books and stories, may be seen in Al Wazir.

We have already seen that the motif of priceless rubies of great antiquity which bear a terrible curse is a recurrent one in Howard’s fiction, as in “The Blood of Belshazzar” and “The Fire of Asshurbanipal.” The lure of rubies certainly proves fatal to Hawkston and his gang. The rubies in “Blood of the Gods” fulfill their function indirectly as it were. They prove to have been lost before the action even begins. Once again the glorious goal proves to be illusory.

Rubies of great antiquity feature in the adventures of both Josiah Harlan and Alexander Gardner. Harlan was presented with a ruby by Dost Mohammed, describing it as covered with some ancient script. Gardner recorded an even stranger incident. A certain fakir in the remote Shignan valley possessed an enormous ruby with Scythian script and the image of an altar such as the fire worshipers employed inscribed on it. The chief of a Kirghiz clan in the area requested it as a gift in order to appease Murad Ali Beg, the warlord of Kunduz. The fakir gave the Kirghiz chief the ruby, asking only for a greater food allowance that he might share with travelers. Despite the gift, Murad Ali Beg continued to raid the Kirghiz.

The conjunction of a European *wazir* (the Arab term for a prime minister) and the *Ruba al Khali* has its own significance. It may be merest coincidence, but the *Ruba al Khali* was in fact explored by not one European prime minister serving an Arabian monarch, but two. St. John Philby was an Englishman who served ibn Saud, the founder of the Saudi kingdom, as his prime minister. In 1931 Philby hoped to be the first Westerner to cross the *Ruba al Khali*. Much to Philby's chagrin Bertram Thomas, the *wazir* to the Sultan of Oman, accomplished the feat just as Philby was setting out. Howard's fictional Al Wazir, of course, derives his name from his duties in the administration of Oman.

Along the way Thomas found remains of an ancient road that allegedly led to the lost city of Ubar, also called Iram of the Many Columns. Mentioned in the Koran and the Arabian Nights, Ubar was an actual location. Legends of its great wealth were fashioned into some of the earliest "Lost Race" stories over a thousand years before Howard sent El Borak among the Greeks of Afghanistan and the devil worshippers of Mt. Erlik Khan. Thomas's report in turn inspired modern explorers to locate Ubar's remains and solve the ancient riddle of Ubar's disappearance.

The next El Borak story, "Sons of the Hawk," appeared in *Complete Stories* in August 1936, under the title "The Country of the Knife." The "outlaw city" motif that was central to "Three-

Bladed Doom" re-appears in the form of Rub el Harami. Howard shifts the point of view from Gordon to Stuart Brent. As in "Hawk of the Hills," this allows him to show action or withhold information from the reader as needed.

Gordon's character gains a further dimension. Always split between American Gordon and Afghan El Borak, he gains a new side: Shirkuh. El Borak is a somewhat dour figure. He is not a treasure hunter, cheerfully plotting to seize vast wealth, or a schemer gambling for a golden throne. Gordon's self-appointed tasks are to rescue a friend or to thwart some murderous plot. But as Shirkuh he is a swaggering Kurdish soldier-of-fortune. He is ready with a boast or a jest, albeit jests that often end in bloodshed. Just as Kipling's Diego Valdez lamented his loss of freedom to office, it seems El Borak needed an escape from duty into a more swashbuckling role.

Rub el Harami is also a character in its own way. So many hidden cities in adventure fiction lack depth, as if they existed only to provide a stream of villains for the hero to kill. Rub el Harami has more than just targets for El Borak's blade: outlaws abound there, as we would expect in "The Abode of Thieves," but the population also includes merchants, beggars and religious scholars. The notion of an entire community living off the proceeds of banditry and smuggling was not so far-fetched in Afghanistan of the 1930s, nor is it in the twenty-first century.

The city of outlaws also proves to be a city of rigid law interpreted by a council of mullahs (an *ulema*, the basic legal institution where Islamic law prevails). In the guise of Shirkuh, Gordon competes against the villain in a slave auction for a prisoner of critical importance. The strict laws of Rub el Harami, enforced by an armed mob, somewhat limit the usual recourse of Howard's characters, violence.

Rafael Sabatini had used the same device in *The Sea Hawk*. Where Sabatini's treatment of the auction scene is low-key (despite its critical importance to the plot), Howard turns it into

an event of high drama leavened with a bit of humor. The headlong narrative swiftly lifts the limitations on violence.

Another custom of Rub el Harami is that one buys passage into the outlaw city by slaying a warrior of the city in fair battle. This may be a nod to Talbot Mundy, in whose *King of the Khyber Rifles* the ticket to the Khinjan Caves, where all the outlaws of the Northwest Frontier dwell, is the head of an Englishman. While less satisfactory for the outlaws, bandits' heads seem easier to obtain than Englishmen's.

"Sons of the Hawk" ends with a desperate battle in a narrow mountain pass between a murderous posse and Gordon's small group of allies. Here is yet another parallel between Gordon and Alexander Gardner. After the defeat of his patron, Habibullah Khan, Gardner and a few loyal companions escaped into Kafiristan. While seeking the road to Takht-i-Sulaiman they were ambushed by a party of fifty Uzbek horsemen from Kunduz. Gardner and his men were very nearly caught in a trap but managed to retreat to a narrow pass. As sheets of rain fell, a vicious hand-to-hand melee raged. In close quarters and pouring rain matchlock guns were useless, or else Gardner and his men would have been shot down like rabbits. Finally, they cut free of the melee while the Kunduz warriors stopped to pillage the dead. Of the thirteen men with Gardner only seven survived.

Howard wrote one other El Borak story, his last and most violent. "Son of the White Wolf" appeared in the December 1936 edition of *Thrilling Adventures*. Like so many other El Borak stories, "Son of the White Wolf" first focuses on the villain. Lieutenant Osman seeks to emulate warlords such as Attila, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane and his own namesake, Osman, the founder of the Ottoman Empire. Obsessed with Pan-Turkish ideology, Osman and his troops renounce Islam and declare their worship of the White Wolf, the ancient tribal totem of the Turks. Paganism and conquest are constant points of reference for Howard's work; here they become pillars of pure evil. Osman says just enough to make his twisted mind clear and precipitously sets

his blood-bath in motion. As British guns boom in the distance Osman and his neo-pagan warriors troop off to found an empire.

The motif of rescuing a white captive, in the form of Olga von Bruckmann, from alien hands is again at work, but El Borak's true motive is revenge, promised to one of the Arab villagers mortally wounded by Osman's killers. "In some ways his nature closely resembled [the Arab's]. He not only understood the cry for vengeance, but he sympathized with it." Duty to others has once again reached its most minimal point, killing for revenge. Unlike Gordon's Afridi friends in "Hawk of the Hills," there is no future for the anonymous Arab dead, El Borak can only obliterate a bloody past.

This is the only El Borak story to directly reference T. E. Lawrence. He does not appear in "Son of the White Wolf," but his role in the Arab revolt is mentioned. An incident related in Lawrence's memoirs seems to parallel the massacre of the Arab village in Howard's story. Retreating before British and Arab forces in 1918, Turkish troops entered the village of Tafas and slaughtered the inhabitants with gruesome and obscene mutilations. In horror, Lawrence told his Bedouin fighters, "The best of you brings me the most Turkish dead." Lawrence's warriors duly cut down the Turkish killers.

The plot element of modern Turks returning to the paganism of their remote ancestors is a theme that fits well with Howard's interest in the starkly primitive. In fact this story has its roots in a rumor circulating in Mecca in 1916, reported by Lowell Thomas in *With Lawrence in Arabia*. It was noised about that the radical nationalist Young Turks were advocating neo-paganism. Thomas wrote that the rumor helped stir up anti-Turkish feeling among the pious Arabs of the Hejaz prior to the revolt of Sharif Hussein. Even today the white wolf is an important symbol of far-right Turkish nationalism.

The El Borak stories had always been violent, but "Son of the White Wolf" pushed it to new extremes. Osman does not just commit mass murder of innocent civilians, he plans the systematic

rape of Arab women to breed a new warrior race. When his plan fails, he kills his women captives in cold blood. Killing of men is normal in Howard's action stories, but "Son of the White Wolf" reaches a level matched only by the last Conan story, "Red Nails." The factors involved on Howard's part may be speculated at. A long-held disdain for sentimentality, a willingness to feed the pulps' increased demand for violence, and a darker worldview as his personal life came under pressure, may all account for Howard's production of such a brutal story. But viewed from the outside, "Son of the White Wolf" seems a natural fit for its time.

Howard had expressed revulsion at atrocities perpetrated by the Turks back in the early 1920s with "Intrigue in Kurdistan." However, Osman's cruelties are not incited by the Turkish High Command. Indeed, they are carried out against villagers friendly to the Turks. This is not a take on the Armenian genocide, in the fashion of Talbot Mundy's *Eye of Zeitoon*. Osman is a new sort of creature, as different from the pallid villains sneering from so many pulp fiction stories as a wolf from a stray dog. Compared to the rather vague schemes of Hunyadi and the tradition-hobbled plots of Abd el Khafid, Osman is a nightmare figure. The childish play-acting of "The Iron Terror" has been left on the other side of the ocean in an imaginary America.

Howard's voluminous correspondence with H. P. Lovecraft had taken something of a political tone by 1936. They had vigorously debated Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia, and Howard had made pointed references to the brutal treatment meted out by "civilized" conquerors to Irish, Belgians, and Africans. Despite Hitler's and Mussolini's pretensions to unite progress with ancestral glories, Howard had no sympathy with their brand of totalitarianism. Lieutenant Osman, the would-be conqueror, may be seen in the light of Howard's debate with Lovecraft on the politics of conquest.

Osman embodies both political and racial violence in ferocious synergy. His rallying cry is, "What Asia needs is not a new party, but a new race!" The birth of that new race is to be midwifed by

the murder of the old one. The threat of a renewed and militant Asia taking vengeance on its oppressors is an old standby of the Yellow Peril genre. Osman is not merely some Fu Manchu pastiche, though. He espouses racial nationalism, worshipping it as a new religion. Osman is dedicated to rape, conquest, and genocide, a nightmare figure resonating with the horrors of Armenia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Auschwitz. Osman is less Yellow Peril than Brownshirt Peril. The last El Borak story points eerily to a fast-approaching future that Howard did not live to see.

The Gordon series is wild and restless; like its protagonist it refuses to settle into routine. The Gordon stories are as likely to be sheer fantasy about time-lost Greek colonies or mountains of gold amassed by devil-worshipping priests as they are to be about starkly realistic blood-feuds over guns and trade or the hyper-reality of fascist madmen perpetrating brutal crimes in the desert. Gordon is himself the central paradox, spinning off parallels and doppelgangers: Gordon the American and El Borak the renegade. Gordon is the ultimate individualist, beholden to no man, living by his own code, yet his constant motivation is loyalty to friends, to allies, even to India against the murderous ambitions of would-be conquerors. Gordon the man who risks his life for his friends, insisting that it is his *personal* duty, has a mirror image in O'Donnell, the greedy treasure hunter who throws away a fortune because it would cost the lives of too many others.

The contrasts are hardwired into Gordon's character, a fictional DNA that replicates itself. The germ begins in ten-year old Bob Howard's imagination. Then it replicates itself, adapting new strategies to survive and multiply in the pulp jungle. The daydream becomes professional storytelling, personal mythology flourishes as commercial writing. That dream took nearly two decades to come to fruition. Now the strange, paradoxical character of El Borak has outlived the twentieth century itself.

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Notes on the Original Howard Texts

The texts for this edition of *El Borak and Other Desert Adventures* were prepared by Rusty Burke, with the assistance of Rob Roehm, Paul Herman, Glenn Lord, Patrice Louinet, Dave Kurzman, and the Cross Plains (Texas) Public Library. The stories have been checked either against Howard's original manuscripts and typescripts, copies of which were provided by Lord or the Cross Plains Public Library, or the first published appearance if a manuscript or typescript was unavailable. Every effort has been made to present the work of Robert E. Howard as faithfully as possible.

Deviations from the original sources are detailed in these textual notes. In the following notes, page, line, and word numbers are given as follows: 3.9.7, indicating page 3, ninth line, seventh word. Story titles, chapter numbers and titles, and breaks before and after chapter headings, titles, and illustrations are not counted. The page/line/word number will be followed by the reading in the original source, or a statement indicating the type of change made. Punctuation changes may be indicated by giving the immediately preceding word followed by the original punctuation.

We have standardized chapter numbering and titling: Howard's own practices varied, as did those of the publications in which these stories appeared. We have not noted those changes here.

Swords of the Hills

Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by The Cross Plains Public Library, Cross Plains, Texas. 3.9.7: semicolon after "silence;" 3.11.3: futiley; 3.11.14: in; 4.26.12: a slash follows "Doubtless" and "ly" typed above; 5.15.14-15: they were; 5.38.3:

steelly; 6.7.12: north west; 6.17.3: “came” repeated, no comma; 6.18.5: breath-takingly; 7.9.6: comma after “roaring;” 8.1.2: avalanch; 8.16.14: “Pushtu” underlined; 9.7.3: semicolon after “hair;” 9.20.2: “Turki” underlined; 9.27.8: with; 9.30.2: stunting; 9.39.6: on to; 10.6.2: distance; 10.12.9: “hand-holds” hyphenated at line break; 10.34.3: desperatedly; 11.9.1: “Frankistan” underlined; 12.1.1: langauges; 12.6.2: comma follows “Surely” rather than “you;” 13.3.8: thousands; 13.7.6: comma follows “town” rather than “and;” 13.39.8: colon after “softly;” 13.40.6: scanty; 14.5.4: serviley; 15.1.6: on to; 15.2.2: on to; 15.3.3: safe-guard; 15.12.8: semicolon after “valley;” 15.13.14: for ever; 15.16.12: following “before” is a hyphen typed above a three-point ellipsis, “the” is not capitalized; 16.28.6: semicolon after “directed;” 16.31.8: on; 16.34.1: following “out” is a hyphen, “with” not capitalized; 17.12.11: “he” not in typescript; 17.26.7: comma after “sparks;” 17.31.13: delapidated; 17.41.8: some one; 18.6.2: exclaimed; 20.4.6: following “you” is a hyphen rather than a period; 20.10.1: some one; 24.6.4: show-down; 25.25.9: “blades” not in typescript; 26.31.3: was; 26.40.8: lady

The Daughter of Erlik Khan

Text taken from *Top-Notch*, December 1934. 30.35.6: hangel; 31.7.4: comma after “south;” 32.10.10: some one; 32.34.13: thoughts; 43.1.1: “cut-throats” hyphenated at line break; 52.13.6: some one; 52.24.10: about; 53.14.11: some one; 55.9.8: “kaffiyeh” not italicized; 59.28.3: she; 60.40.2: stranger; 61.12.4: to-morrow; 61.35.3: to-night; 65.36.1: to-night; 68.13.12: any one; 68.18.8: some one; 68.20.16: some one; 74.7.6: Yesmeena’s; 75.1.8: no comma after “Orkhan;” 77.23.10: causway

Three-Bladed Doom

Text taken from Howard’s typescript, provided by The Cross Plains Public Library, Cross Plains, Texas. There are two different versions of this story. The longer version, about 42,000 words,

was written first. When it failed to sell, Howard rewrote it, cutting it down to about 24,000 words. The shorter version appears in the "Miscellanea" section. 89.21.1: slanted; 89.24.5: closted; 90.12.5: the; 92.30.7: agiley; 93.14.6: "the" not in typescript; 95.18.12: scretly; 97.7.11: semicolon after "Ghilzais;" 97.11.7: its; 98.5.5: stratgetic; 98.12.1: no comma after "suppose;" 98.19.5: no comma after 'ravine'; 100.2.10: "the" not in typescript; 101.30.6: worship; 103.17.6: blood-drops; 103.20.10: whom; 104.11.6: criticising; 107.13.2: analzying; 108.5.11: analzyed; 109.33.5: taller; 110.3.2: taller; 110.6.3: "have" repeated; 111.32.6: colon after "heartily;" 114.2.3: palacial; 114.15.3: leans; 116.14.3: *Sidna;* 118.8.3: reverance; 118.13.4: unobtrusedly; 119.6.3: thing; 119.16.12: enemity; 120.8.11: mountains; 120.28.11: Lelesh; 121.36.11: referances; 122.34.3: "a" not in typescript; 123.2.11: immorial; 124.23.1: "one" not in typescript; 127.2.6: intricasies; 128.17.5: furtherest; 131.1.6: villian; 131.11.6: too; 135.2.3: futiley; 135.2.7: "them" not in typescript; 135.18.5: nitche; 137.2.9: you" he; 139.39.3: tha; 140.8.14: comma outside quotation mark; 142.30.4: "to" not in typescript; 145.12.12: "be" not in typescript; 148.4.1: steading; 148.28.14: in typescript, "have" added by hand other than Howard's; 149.4.12: trandscends; 149.6.7: immobily; 149.41.4: tinging; 153.2.9: "fedauis" not underlined (i.e., not italicized); 153.26.13: no comma after "when;" 156.21.12: Some one; 157.36.10: holt; 159.28.5: see; 162.15.4: her's; 163.34.7: Any way; 164.22.2: "the" not in typescript; 167.9.1: "Effendi" not underlined (i.e., not italicized); 168.15.9: freized; 172.7.13: beleagered; 178.9.1–3: "Aie! Ahai! Ohee!" not underlined (i.e., not italicized); 178.15.1: "Ohai" not underlined (i.e., not italicized); 178.17.11: "that" not capitalized

Hawk of the Hills

Text taken from *Top-Notch*, June 1935. 185.6.5: coördination; 185.10.9: hyphen between "hand" and "fighting;" 186.34.8: to-day; 188.18.4: semicolon after "structure;" 189.33.13: rôle; 193.41.5: "the" not in original; 198.13.8: to-day; 199.1.8:

reëchoing; 202.30.3: close quote following question mark; 206.21.5: reënforce; 211.22.6: “El” not in original; 218.3.6: to-night; 218.11.7: To-night; 218.18.12: to-night; 220.24.1: to-morrow; 225.35.1: To-night

Blood of the Gods

Text taken from *Top-Notch*, July 1935. 235.36.1–2: *Ahakim;* 237.2.3: *Inman;* 239.7.5: Any one; 244.29.2: “him” not in original; 249.25.15: *Bhadavat;* 251.19.12: any one; 253.23.2: The; 255.8.3: Some one; 261.20.11: to-night; 262.2.6: handholes; 262.21.7: The; 264.21.3: mèlée; 264.24.10: The; 267.17.3: “egg-shell” hyphenated at line break; 270.9.6: to-night; 271.1.6: disgruntedly; 271.5.10: plaintiff; 273.22.9: rocks

Sons of the Hawk

Text taken from *Complete Stories*, August 1936 (as “The Country of the Knife”). 275.4.15: any one; 277.27.8: staggering; 278.31.2: To-morrow; 284.36.5: some one; 286.36.8: naïve; 292.7.12: naïve; 292.21.6: yiedled; 294.1.8: naïvely; 298.22.4: Adobe; 299.5.6: mêlée; 305.30.5: rôle; 306.16.7: the; 307.20.4: tonight; 307.21.9: to-morrow; 307.28.2: reëcho; 307.41.7: Shirkuk; 308.3.12: tomorrow; 308.25.11: reply; 308.37.8: naïveness; 312.1.13: horses; 315.22.7: dragged; 316.40.5: mêlée; 318.6.5: to-morrow; 320.16.3: To-morrow; 321.36.7: rôle; 323.9.5: to-night; 323.13.1: to-night; 323.18.14: to-night; 326.14.12: exchange; 328.8.5: rôle; 333.13.13: blades

Son of the White Wolf

Text taken from *Thrilling Adventures*, December 1936. One complete carbon copy of a Howard draft typescript survives, with markings and additions in the author’s hand, as well as three partial drafts. These drafts were consulted in the preparation of this text. 336.22.7: Some one (complete draft has “someone”);

336.35.16: comma after “rain;” 337.26.5: lightninglike (drafts have “lightning-like”); 338.2.11: hawklike (drafts have “hawk-like”); 338.40.12: Sulaiman’s (in all drafts, Howard’s preferred spelling is “Sulayman”); 340.19.6: *akbat;* 340.20: line space occurs before “Yusef smiled fiercely…;” 340.22.9: comma after “death;” 340.36.4: Istambul (in all drafts, Howard’s preferred spelling is “Stamboul”); 341.8.13: semicolon after “gone;” 341.13.11: Sulaiman; 341.36.1: comma after “spies;” 342.17.14: you; 343.36.4: Sulaiman; 343.38.4: Sulaiman; 344.21.7: Sulaiman; 345.13.12: Sulaiman; 350.30.3: comma after “reward;” 350.30.8: comma after “head;” 354.25.10: no comma after “Musa” (comma in complete draft); 354.41.6: head; 355.2.6: pounds’.;” 356.30.11: Sulaiman; 357.28.12: “that” not in original (does appear in complete draft); 360.12.16: no comma after “knees” (comma in complete draft); 360.19.1: sunburnt (“sun-burnt” in complete draft); 361.7.10: period after “Olga;” 361.19.13: “ear-shot” hyphenated at line break

Gold from Tatary

Text taken from *Thrilling Adventures*, January 1935 (as “The Treasures of Tartary”). 366.39.9: “high-lands” hyphenated at line break; 369.25.11: “overhanging” hyphenated at line break; 369.29.5: comma after “Baluchistan;” 370.5.6: period after “enemy;” 375.33.2: you; 377.14.1: O’Connell; 378.9.10: mêlée

Swords of Shahrazar

Text taken from *Top-Notch*, October 1934. 386.37.1–3: golden-frieze work; 388.1.9: to-night; 388.4.9: Kahn; 393.7.11: reënforcements; 395.3.14: comma after “lawless;” 395.36.15: Kahn; 401.5.3: To-morrow; 401.15.9: no period after “name;” 401.26.6: reappearing; 402.6.1: To-morrow; 403.18.13: no period after “Moslems;” 409.5.11: period rather than question mark after “Khan;” 412.1.1: Some one

The Trail of the Blood-Stained God

Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by the Cross Plains Public Library, Cross Plains, Texas. 425.5.11–13: *Medina el Harami* underlined (i.e., italicized); 427.19.10: stuck; 428.36.12–13 and 429.1.1: *Medina el Harami* underlined; 430.31.2–4: *Medina el Harami* underlined; 435.38.6: unexpecteness; 436.1.1: semicolon after "before;" 440.34.10–12: "blood-stained god" not capitalized; 443.4.1: repellant; 443.4.11: repellantly; 445.24.1: involuntary

The Fire of Asshurbanipal

Text taken from *The Howard Collector* 16, Spring 1972. 449.4.2: comma after "head;" 450.7.5: Steeve; 452.25.9: lorelei; 453.20.7: Steeve; 456.38.9: Steeve; 459.19.6: Steeve; 466.16.3: Steeve

Three-Bladed Doom

Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by the Cross Plains Public Library, Cross Plains, Texas. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled Fragment

Text taken from Howard's typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

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Rusty Burke

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Stuart Williams

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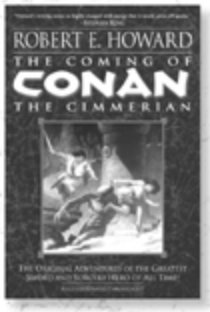

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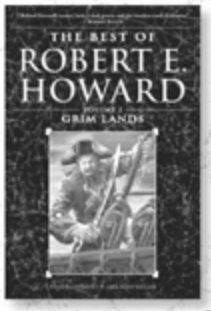

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